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POETRY IN THE HOLOCAUST: GHETTO AND CONCENTRATION CAMP
POETRY

City University of New York

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POETRY IN THE HOLOCAUST: GHETTO AND CONCENTRATION CAMP POETRY

by

Frieda W. Aaron

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty
in Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of
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1985



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FRIEDA W. AARON

1985

This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty
in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation re-
quirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

January 29, 1985
date

Daniel Gerould
Chairman of Examining Committee

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date

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To the Memory
of my father, Symcha Wakszlak, who died in Majdanek,
and to all the fathers killed in the Holocaust.

To the memory
of my mother, Michla Wakszlak, who survived not only
for herself but for all the mothers who did not.

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INTRODUCTION

Much of Holocaust literature was written after the fact and has been the concern of Holocaust scholarship. However, the vast body of creative writing produced during the event has been largely neglected, perhaps owing to the difficulties of Yiddish and Polish, the principal languages in which most of it was written. Although this literature reveals a full spectrum of literary expression, poetry is the dominant form. Moreover, "the quickest reaction" to the genocide, as Henryk Grynberg writes, "came in poetry; first of all from the Polish-Jewish poets who wrote while locked in the ghettos or isolated in their hideouts before the annihilation of the ghettos and the so-called "final solution."¹ The work of these poets, both established ones and neophytes, and spontaneous literary activity in general were widespread in the crucible of the German occupation. Indeed, after waves of mass deportations to death centers those who managed to stay alive continued their feverish writing. This flowering of literature reflects a determination both to reaffirm traditional values and to leave a testament for posterity.

The objective of this dissertation is to bring this largely unexamined body of poetry to light and to determine

its significance both as literature and as a social document-- a poetics in extremis. This study is, therefore, an analytical and critical attempt to explore the impact of the immediacy of Holocaust experience as a formative influence on perception, response, and literary imagination. It is assumed that literature which is coeval with unfolding events is different, in some ways, from that presented by eye-witnesses writing after the fact. Literature (or history) produced in the ghettos and concentration camps may not reflect the dramatic or tragic irony exemplified in post-war literature. The survivor poet has been vouchsafed a temporal perspective that his counterpart who did not survive could not have. But the writers in the Holocaust articulate an immediacy of experience that is unmodified by the processes of remembering. For as Janusz Korczak observes in his Ghetto Diary, "reminiscences hinge on our immediate experience. Reminiscing, we lie unconsciously." Although the time element that precipitates "unconscious lying" is the aesthetic distance, part of the very artistic process required to distance the suffering from the creative mind in order to polish the form, only total recall can attempt to express the existential exactness perceived and articulated in the immediacy of experience. Hence this body of literature may shed new light on the central event of our century.

Another reason for my undertaking this work is my personal wish to resurrect the bards of the ghettos and

concentration camps. Although I was a child in Warsaw when the capital was occupied and the ghetto sealed off, and an adolescent during the uprising and my subsequent incarceration in several concentration camps, I remember vividly the significance of the poets. They were not only among the first to react to Nazi barbarism, but, like ancient prophets, they also assumed positions of moral leadership, condemning moral transgressions among the Jews and openly railing against the Judenrate, or Jewish police. Moreover, these writers exhorted the Jews to help each other, and sustained their morale by rousing them to fight back with all they had. At the same time, their songs and poems were a vehicle of indispensable catharsis.

In the ghetto, both my sister and I performed in one of several children's theatres, where ghetto poetry, among other things, was an integral part of the repertory. And in our own family, before the rush of roundups, deportations, and other disasters and even during their interludes, nightly readings of classical Yiddish literature were undertaken by my father (something we never did before the war, for Polish was our dominant language). We children brought to these readings the songs and poems that we learned in the streets of the ghetto and the theatre or the poems we wrote ourselves. And we wrote continually: either individually or in joint efforts with our friends both in the ghetto, where writing materials were available, and in concentration camps,

where they were not. There we confabulated, composing songs and poems and occasionally committing them to memory.

These ephemeral creations, like the ghetto poetry, were a vehicle of spiritual sustenance. In concentration camps, unlike the ghetto, the intuitive purpose of this creativity was neither the poem for itself nor even the poem as bearer of witness--since without writing materials this was hardly possible--but rather the process. For it was the process that helped to keep the soul alive. Indeed, in the camps--certainly in those in which I was incarcerated: Skarzysko, Czestochowa, if not Maidanek--the composing of poetry was accompanied by romanticized tales of pre-war life. But what is most memorable is that, although they did not happen every day, these times of creativity were the ones when the spirit of readiness to help each other was most apparent. This is not to suggest that everyone was engaged in creativity or that creativity necessarily fostered mutual help, but it certainly helped to mobilize coping mechanisms of which mutual help and confabulation were an important part. L. Eitinger, a psychiatrist and survivor, like Viktor Frankl, writes that:

the group of people who were able to mobilize the most adequate coping mechanism were those who, for one reason or another, could retain their personality and system of values more or less intact even under conditions of nearly complete social anomy. Those who were most fortunate in this respect were the persons who... could both show and practice interest in others, who could retain their values inside the camp at the same level as outside the camp."³

Both in concentration camps and the ghettos most of the poets created poetry less as a means of self-expression than as succor, a vehicle of mitigating daily disasters. This phenomenon reflects the tradition of Jewish literature that responded to over two millennia of Jewish suffering with poetry, threnodies, and liturgy of consolation. Interestingly, as David Roskies writes, consolation was drawn from earlier paradigms of calamity. "Even when the catastrophe was perceived as being unprecedented, the historical song, with its use of biblical quotations, its liturgical framework and its theodicy, all served to console the listener, to mitigate the disaster, to render the actual, time-bound event into something transtemporal. This is because, in the traditional Jewish view, the greater the scope of the destruction, the more it recalls historical precedent."⁴

Yet between the wars and even in the last decades of the nineteenth century modern Yiddish poetry--Europeanized and secularized as it was by the Enlightenment (Haskalah) as well as by Zionism and Socialism--forced an opening in the link to traditional themes and modes of expression. Indeed, several major currents appeared on the heels of each other: each as a reaction to its forerunner and, above all, to unalloyed traditionalism. The first were Di Yunge, a poetic movement that appeared simultaneously in Poland, Russia, and the United States at the turn of the century. Brought up on Yiddish literary conventions, these writers resolved to merge

their Yiddishkayt with such literary currents as romanticism, impressionism (largely German) and symbolism (mostly Russian) and the Polish Skamander. This dialectic produced an emphasis on individuality, subjectivity, and unhampered--sometimes audacious--methods of expression, rejecting the rigidity of traditionalism, political propaganda, didacticism, and chauvinism.

The credos of Di Yunge were radically modified, if not totally changed, in the twenties by another group, the In Zich (Introspectivists), a progeny of Americanized immigrants. The Introspectivists stressed intellectual poetry, experimental forms that reflected the natural rhythms of Yiddish speech, and free verse, as well as the equal importance of expressing eloquently feeling and rationality. Their intellectual principles included the primacy of the self (the zich) as the prism through which the outer world was refracted. Champions of Yiddishkayt, their ultimate aim was to establish the Yiddish poet more firmly in the modern world.

In Warsaw, a major center of secular Yiddish culture and literature, a parallel movement called Di Khaliastre (The Gang) appeared in the twenties. Like their counterparts on the other side of the Atlantic, these poets made emphatic the primacy of individuality and experimental forms; but they also showed unmistakable expressionistic tendencies, proclaiming a form of anarchy, one that denounced the

Haskalah, religion, and politics. Another group established in the thirties in Vilna--the cradle of Jewish learning referred to as the "Jerusalem of Lithuania" (Yerushalaim der Lihte)--was known as Yung Vilna (Young Vilna). Although highly politicized by poverty and anti-Semitism, as well as by such political movements as Zionism, Territorialism, and Socialism, Yung Vilna did not provide unified poetic principles.

The Holocaust subverted each of these inter-war movements and their rhetoric. Overwhelmed by the cataclysm and the indifference of the world, Yiddish poets during and after the war saw the sterility of the humanistic promises and later Socialism, renouncing the modernistic poetic credos and returning to the traditional concerns of Yiddish writers: the fate of the community. Even the Polish-Jewish poets reclaimed the ancient paradigm, notably that of Lamentations, stressing the continuum of Jewish disasters and suffering. This phenomenon is reflected in the work of such poets in the Holocaust as Wladyslaw Szlengel and Mieczyslaw Jastrun, who were not only avowed secularists but who were also grounded in Polish literature; Yiddish poets like Abraham Sutzkever, Shmerke Katcherginsky, Yeshayahu Spiegel, and Sh. Shayevitch, who had their literary roots both in biblical paradigms and modern Yiddish poetics; and Hebrew poets like Yitzhak Katzenelson, who during the war significantly returned to Yiddish, the daily tongue of the Jewish masses. Thus Jastrun, for example, using the idiom of lamentation liturgy,

invokes Jerusalem and casts a bridge between the destruction of the Temple and that of the Warsaw Ghetto, "Here too like in Jerusalem/ There is the somber Wailing Wall,/ Those who stood near it,/ Will see it no more" (see Chapter Three of this study). Apparently, Jastrun saw in Lamentations not a reaction to a specific historical event of a 587 B.C.E. but an archetypal work that established the paradigm of Jewish catastrophes and suffering.

By the Waters of Babylon and Job, written by Katzenelson in the Warsaw Ghetto, invoke, as the titles of these plays indicate, the memory of historical precedents to recall both disasters and principles of morality and human values. For older models of Jewish conduct during catastrophes were needed as the Jews in the Warsaw Ghetto grappled with physical and spiritual survival. Later in Vittel, a camp in France, from which he was dispatched to Auschwitz to meet the fate of most other Jews, Katzenelson poured out his lament in The Song of the Murdered Jewish People. This Yiddish jeremiad abounds in allusions to Ezekiel, Lamentations, Jeremiah, and other biblical references, all of which invoke the memory of communal grief. But while the biblical models, deeply figured and troped as they may be, are structured along logical lines, Katzenelson's threnody combines an identifiable pattern of external architectonics (fifteen cantos, fifteen four-line stanzas each) with an internal arrangement that defies any known design. Only those who

have knowledge of the chronology of events can decode the inner substance. The disjunctive internal structure is primarily revealed in the dissolution of time. The chronological order of events is suspended in surreal timelessness, and the cantos are held together by the displaced logic of nightmares. The recounting of the sequence of events dissolves in a lament, and the words tumble out in the distraught confusion of uncontrollable weeping. The poem's disjunctiveness is not only a genuine reflection of grief but also an unobtrusive rejection of all paradigms and conventional poetic structures, for none compares to the Holocaust. Thus the poet uses biblically allusive language to undermine archetypal lamentations and to highlight the difference between earlier catastrophes and the Holocaust. As Noah Resenbloom writes,

"Jeremiah and Ezekiel saw the destruction of their land; Katzenelson saw the annihilation of his people. Job was bereft of his children and afflicted with pain, yet even the celestial Satan was admonished to 'save his life'." Katzenelson lost everything and everybody and the German Satan was now about to take his life too. The voice commending the poet [to write] is not the voice of the omnipotent and omniscient God of the prophets in whose wisdom and justice they believed. The poet's skies are blind and empty and he is called upon to play and make believe "as if a God were there... as if a great joy still shone for us there." 5

The crisis of faith that is adumbrated in Katzenelson's threnody, while not universal, is a pervasive theme in the poetry in the Holocaust. Wladyslaw Szlengel's "It's High Time," discussed at length in Chapter Two of this study, is an example of a bitter diatribe against God. A more subdued

accusation, but one that also shows the paradox of recalling and rewriting historical precedents is Abraham Sutzkever's "Under Your White Stars." Here the poet prostrates himself under God's firmament and prays for deliverance. Hiding out in a cellar he laments that his "cellar-vision" causes the stars and, by implication, his faith to fade. Since "in the cellars and hovels/ slaughtering silence weeps,"⁶ the poet finds loftier places. Thus he runs across rooftops--another hiding place--seeking his God. This ironic statement is followed by a desperate avowal of faith. "I hang--a⁷ shattered chord/ and dedicate my song to you."

Yiddish poetry written since the end of the war grapples with similar problems. As Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg have stated in the introduction to their anthology, A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, "about the ultimate preoccupation of Yiddish poetry there can be no doubt. After the Second World War all the schools, groups, and tendencies melt away; disputes as to poetic direction must now seem trivial; every Yiddish writer finds himself under the most crushing and sacred of obligations. The memory of cataclysm is decisive.... To an overwhelming extent Yiddish poetry becomes a Khurbn⁸ or holocaust poetry." The concerns of these poets are similar to those in the Holocaust, namely, the eternal suffering as a major component in Jewish history and the role of the Jewish God during the greatest tragedy in that history. Thus Jacob Glatstein comes close to

Sutzkever's perception of the extinction of the divine
firmament:

Now the lifeless skulls
Add up into millions.
The stars are going out around you.
The memory of you is dimming,
Your kingdom will soon be over....
Jewish God! 9
You are almost gone.

Another dialogue with God is Kadia Molodowsky's reversal
of Sutzkever's and Glatstein's perception of fading divinity.
Her's is a bitter and ironic plea that the ancient bond of
the covenant established at Sinai be recanted and imposed on
some other people:

O God of Mercy
For the time being
Choose another people.
We are tired of death, tired of corpses,
We have no more prayers.
.....
God of Mercy
Sanctify another land
Another Sinai.
.....

O God of Mercy
Grant us one more blessing-- 10
Take back the gift of our separateness.

Non-Yiddish speaking Jewish poets like Nelly Sachs and
Paul Celan, whether writing about the Holocaust or not,
without abandoning them return from German literary
conventions to biblical and Hasidic sources, holding, at the
same time, the God of the covenant accountable for the
processes of history. Thus these poets comment respectively,
"I just have the feeling that Jewish artists must begin to
listen to the voice of their lineage, so that the old spring

may awaken to new life. With that in mind I have attempted¹¹
to write a mystery play [Eli] of the suffering of Israel."

"The landscape from which I come to you--by way of what
detours! but are there even such things as detours?--this
landscape may be unknown to most of you. It is the landscape
that was the home for a not inconsiderable part of those
Hasidic tales that Martin Buber recounted to us all in¹²
"German." In her poem, "O the chimneys," Nelly Sachs
transforms the chimney, the final agent of Jewish martyrdom,
into an ironic image of eternal Jewish martyrdom preordained
("devised") from the dawn of Jewish history, the time of
Jeremiah and Job:

O the Chimneys
Freedomway for Jeremiah and Job's dust--
Who devised you and laid stone upon stone
The road for refugees of smoke? 13

A more explicit indictment of the God of the covenant is Paul
Celan's "There Was Earth in Them:"

They dug and dug, and thus
Their day wore on, and their night. And they did not
praise God,
who, they heard, willed all this,
who, they heard, knew all this. 14

Although the poets in the Holocaust share with their
post Holocaust counterparts fundamental historical and
suprahistorical concerns--"the voice of their lineage," the
"landscape... of Hasidic tales," the invocation of earlier
disasters as a vehicle of solace, and the diminished stature
of God--the former show much less concern with issues of
aestheticism that were to preoccupy the latter. The ongoing

debate among post-war writers on the inappropriateness of
 aesthetic forms to articulate the horror of what David
 Rousset called "l'univers concentrationnaire"
 (concentrationary universe), did not trouble the poets in the
 Holocaust, even if some of them intuitively avoided high
 rhetoric or the preoccupation with aesthetic forms (although
 some of their poetry, notably Polish, shows unmistakable
 modernistic tendencies, i.e., unusual patterns both of
 versification and grammatical structures, as well as
 punctuations). Warnings that there are inherent dangers in
 transcribing the horrors of the Holocaust into artistic
 representations would probably astonish most of the writers
 in the Holocaust. Was it not Chaim Kaplan who said in the
 Warsaw Ghetto that "more than bread we need poetry at a time
 when we don't seem to need it at all"? It was certainly
 Kaplan who wrote in his Warsaw Diary that "a poet who clothes
 adversity in poetic form immortalizes it in an everlasting
 monument." And it was he who exhorted the poets to write,
 "Poet of the people where art thou?" It is doubtful that
 either Kaplan or the poets on whom he calls were concerned
 with problems of aesthetic form. In general, "The sense of
 aesthetic distance" write Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg,
 "that allows writers to direct their energies toward formal
 problems of literature was not available to Yiddish
 writers.... From birth the Yiddish poet was an 'engaged'
 writer, and in that sense, if no other, he had
 indeed been chosen. He knew to whom his heart was pledged."

No better epitaph can be written for the poets in the Holocaust.

Hence the other challenge, namely, silence, (mounted by Michael Wyshogrod, George Steiner, among others) that has now assumed popular currency, rather than serious and responsible discourse and exegesis, would probably also puzzle the writers in the Holocaust. For, surely, silence would grant yet another victory to the forces of darkness. Based on the flowering of poetry in the ghettos and camps, it can be assumed that the poets in the Holocaust would wish posterity to read and to discuss the implications of what they had to say. Even if language does not suffice, and even if literature is inappropriate to the Holocaust, as Michael Wyshogrod or Elie Wiesel argue, literature in and of the Holocaust, nonetheless, is a defense against forgetfulness; and redemption, we are told by the Baal Shem Tov, "lies in remembering." Paradoxically, those who call for silence intuitively write. Although, as they insist, ours may be a time for silence, "silence is impossible; nothing can be said, but everything must be spoken; and from the impermissibility of words comes powerful speech."¹⁸

Every occasion in the Holocaust--memories of the lost world or exploding events--inspired poetry. If nothing else, this literary activity "repudiates," as Yechiel Sheintuch writes in his essay on Katzenelson, "the assertion that the Jewish response to Nazi terror was spiritual paralysis and

submission. Katzenelson's prolific work in the Warsaw ghetto in no way expresses despair or spiritual disintegration, but rather the very opposite--it is a symbolic act of resolute resistance in a situation in which all other effective forms of resistance were blocked.¹⁹ Indeed, as Sheintuch further observes, "Katzenelson is a vivid example of the phenomenon whereby literary response is heightened the more direct and immediate the writer's confrontation with death."²⁰ The same is true of many other poets, Szlengel for example, whose early ghetto poetry is not of the highest artistic maturity. The poetry that confronts the impending destruction has greater profundity, maturity of feeling, and artistic quality.

Since a concerted effort was made to retain or to invoke a measure of "normal" life and since such attempts lie within the purview of instinctive human behavior, especially when survival is at stake, not all the poetry addresses the cataclysm. A whole spectrum of other poems was produced, including banal and jocular ones. Although such endeavors helped divert attention from the gloom and despair of daily survival, they invariably reflect the historical context of the occupation, as well as patterns of response to it. The dominant theme of these poems, even when they are satiric, is usually life and the primacy of moral resistance, as articulated in the following folk-song written by H. Broyda:

Moyshe, halt zikh, Moyshe, halt zikh!
Nit tsefal zikh.
Halt zikh Moyshe, fester.

Moyshe, halt oys.
Gedenk--men darf aroys!

(Moshah, keep going, Moshah keep going!/ Don't fall apart./
Moshah, keep going even stronger./ Moshah, don't give up,/ Remember--we must survive.)

Banalities, jocularity, and satire are the dominant modes that especially mark the early poetry both of the established and folk poets who proliferated in the ghettos and who were determined to leave a testament for posterity. Both handled the initial period of occupation and its brutality with incredulity, believing that the war would soon end or the outside world or God Himself would intervene on their behalf. This strategy helped them to achieve a semblance of distance from the increasingly intolerable reality. Frequently the mockery was bitter and directed against the neighbors beyond the ghetto walls. One such poem is Wladyslaw Szlengel's "Telephone," discussed in Chapter one. Other early poetry reflects nostalgia and yearning for freedom, for the lost pre-war world. These characteristics inform another of Szlengel's poems, "Windows Facing the Other Side." This poem establishes the extent to which the Jew is dehumanized and separated from the world outside the ghetto. The window of the poet's ghetto apartment faces not only the "Aryan" side of Warsaw but also the lovely Krasinski Park. Yet looking out the window and feasting his eyes on "Aryan" trees is strictly forbidden. He is "Jewish worm and a Jewish mole," and it is "right and just" that like all the other Jews he "should and must be blind." However, at night the

poet rushes to his window, "ravenously gazing and stealing
22
snatches of darkened Warsaw." Szlengel's longing for his
beloved city is intensified and spiritualized by the anguish
of loss and by memory. The poem ends on a cadence of ironic
resignation; Warsaw beyond the window and, therefore, the
world, the culture, the life that were once his own are lost
forever.

Later poetry, Szlengel's or that of other poets, rejects
concerns of cultural truncation because of the inverse
relationship between the increasing atrocities and the
intensified sense of Jewish identity. This poetry reflects
the growing awareness of the conflagration--an epiphany that
provoked many poets to use their poetry as a call to armed
resistance. Even some of those poets, Katzenelson for
example, who initially adhered to traditional Judaic pacifism
rejected it in the end, using their new voice to infuse the
Jews with a spirit of rebellion. Other prominent poets, who
carried the poetic banner of Jewish revolt and heroism,
include Sutzkever, Szlengel, Katcherginsky, and Glik. The
last is known for the famous partisan hymn "Never Say that
You Walk the Final Road." The work of these poets, as well
as that of those with humbler reputations is a testament to
and an example of the evocative power and political function
of poetry in the Holocaust. Such poets as Katzenelson were a
source of inspiration not only of the uprising in the Warsaw
Ghetto, where he lived, but also of the rebellion in the
Bialystok Ghetto. Hence, like the poetry that provided

spiritual succor, the martial poems, too, refute the assumption that the Jews were passive.

Poems put to song were especially popular in the Holocaust. This phenomenon reflects the Yiddish folk tradition, for as Shmerke Katcherginsky writes in his introduction to Lider fun Ghettsos un Lagern (Songs in the Ghettos and Concentration Camps), "Dos lid, dos glaykhvertl, dem sharfn vits--hobn beglayt dem Yiddn shtendik un umetum: ven er iz gegangen tsu der arbet, ven er iz geshtanen in ray nokh a shihseleh zup, ven men hot im gefirt tsuder shkhitah, un ven er iz gegangen in kamf." ²³ (The song, the proverb, the witty joke, have always and everywhere accompanied the Jew: when he went to work, when he waited on a soup-line, when he was driven to the slaughter, and when he marched in combat). Whether written by established poets or amateurs, their work was feverishly saved from destruction by such institutions, for example, as YIVO in Vilna and deposited in hermetically sealed containers which were stealthily buried.

A popular forum especially for the poetry written in the early period of the occupation was the literary cafe, the cabaret, and some of the theatres that proliferated in the ghettos. In the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, before the commencement of mass deportations in July, 1942, there were four Polish language establishments: the cabaret "Sztuka" (Art), whose central figure and motivating force was Wladyslaw Szlengel, and the theatres "Femina," "Melody

Palace," and "Na Pietrku" (The Second Floor). There were also two Yiddish theatres: "Eldorado," and "Nowy Azazel" (New Azazel). In addition, there was a Yiddish drama studio under the auspices of the Zionist Dror-Hechalutz movement, but founded and directed by Yitzhak Katzenelson. In the Lodz Ghetto a group of adolescents created a Yiddish theatre called the "Avant-Guard," and the Vilna Ghetto Yiddish theatre was known as "Der Kleyner Shtot Zal" (The Small City Theatre). Later, when these places no longer existed, poetry was circulated among many people and read both in slave factories that were established in the larger ghettos and at "literary evenings." In concentration camps oral poetry, as mentioned above, was composed on barrack bunk beds during coveted moments of rest.

Although I have mentioned several major poets, not all of them figure in this dissertation. My study is not an attempt to survey the work produced by all well known poets in the Holocaust; instead it is an in depth analysis of representative poems that either because of their artistic maturity or their special historical significance seem best to reflect the Jewish response to the mass destruction. Since there was a spontaneous explosion of folk-poets and street singers, who were moved by a compulsion to bear witness, and since their endeavors, however unsophisticated or lachrymose, reflect a simple veracity, some very brief examples of their work is provided. The poets who figure most prominently in this study are Abraham Sutzkever,

Wladyslaw Szlengel, Czeslaw Milosz, Jozef Bau, Shmerke Katcherginsky, Mieczyslaw Jastrun, Julian Przybos, and, briefly, Yitzhak Katzenelson.

The methodology employed in this study is textual explication, for a close reading seems to allow the poems to speak their own truth, to communicate their nature, meaning, and significance in their own terms. This technique of criticism seems best suited to a poetry that, despite its tangential links to other literatures (discussed above), reveals profound shifts of sensibility, of separateness, and discontinuity in the history of literature. Indeed, shaped by the "daily dread of experience" (if a pun be permitted), this poetry seems to signal a new genre, one that evolved from and is peculiar to the historicity that forged it. But this poetry, like all the literature in and of the Holocaust, has not yet produced a new poetic idiom; for as Czeslaw Milosz writes in his discussion of Michal Borwicz's evaluation of the literature in the concentration camps, these poems "belong stylistically to the pre-war period, but at the same time they try to express 'the new,' which cannot be grasped by any of the available notions and means of expression."²⁴

Even if the Holocaust has not yet produced a new poetic idiom nor yet occasioned new kinds of writing about this event, it has, like most literature that addresses it, and as Alvin Rosenfeld writes, "greatly complicated all the literary

forms it has occupied and seems to be in the process of breaking them down in an effort to find some new, more adequate measure of chronicling a radical evil and the range of human response to it." ²⁵ Although many scholars--literary and others--have attempted it, most have failed to provide a methodology of evaluating and perhaps, therefore, of understanding Holocaust literature. The problem is obvious: the imagination of those who were not there has no point of reference, and there are no new modes of expression to bridge the gap. As Rosenfeld argues:

We are yet to develop the kind of practical criticism that will allow us to read, interpret, and evaluate Holocaust literature with any precision and confidence. Older criticisms of whatever orientation or variety--Freudian, Marxist, formalist, structuralist, or linguistic--will not do here for a number of reasons. The largest is that the conception of man, or world view embodied in psychoanalysis or dialectical theory or theories of aesthetic autonomy had almost no place in the ghettos and camps, which were governed by forces of an altogether different and far less refined nature. As a result, it would seem a radical misapplication of methods and intentions to search through literary accounts of Auschwitz or the Warsaw Ghetto for covert Oedipal symbols, class struggle, revealing patterns of imagery and symbolism, mythic analogies, or deep grammatical structures. Auschwitz no more readily reduces to these considerations than death itself.²⁶

The thematic division of this poetry is tripartite; and a separate chapter is devoted to each theme. This schema proved compelling, because the themes derive from their textual compass. Chapter one is an exploration of testimonial or documentary poetry. Chapter Two examines poetry that is concerned with the morale of the people, with

forms of moral resistance, and the crisis of faith. Chapter Three is an exegesis of political and resistance poetry. It should be noted, however, that most of the poetry in the Holocaust reveals an underlying principle: the primacy of testimony. Poets, therefore, whether addressing one issue or another, wanted chiefly to bear witness. Thus, like historians, their urgent purpose was to leave a testament for posterity. But unlike historians, they have transformed monstrous reality into art. Admittedly, this art does not conform to the assumption that the purpose of art is to assuage the anguish of reality or that it must transcend the abyss through a moral vision, one that seeks redemption by striving for perfection and excellence. But this art is art by virtue of its ability to express the wretchedness and brutality of existence and thereby provide a measure of catharsis, which often managed to keep at bay, for many who were in the ghettos and camps at the time, the despair that threatened to overwhelm them. If poetry in the Holocaust managed to document and thereby to unveil, as only poetry can, patterns of human response to the terror, despair, and death, then it fought against, even if it did not conquer, them and provided for its immediate readers as well as for posterity a form of temporary salvation. For the readers in the Holocaust this "salvation" meant spiritual succor and catharsis; and for post-Holocaust readers it might also translate into spiritual succor, a sense of awe that it was written at all: that people can have the moral fortitude to

write poetry, this most sublime of literary expressions, in the darkest of nights.

Research for this project involved the compilation of a large mass of unpublished material that, while carefully studied and consulted, was not included in this thesis. This material appears to be of great value as a historical document. However, its artistic value has not yet been ascertained. Further study, involving classification into categories and evaluation of the literary merit of this body of poetry is being considered. The manuscripts were obtained from such institutions as YIVO and the Polish Institute of Art and Science in New York and the Documentation Center and Museum of the Holocaust and Resistance at Beit Lahomei Haghettaot in Israel. Additional data were obtained from other Israeli archives, including Yad Vashem.

NOTES

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3 L. Eitinger, "On Being a Psychiatrist and a Survivor," in Confronting the Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel, ed. Alvin Rosenfeld & Irving Greenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 196.

4 David Roskies, "The Pogrom Poem and the Literature of Destruction," Notre Dame English Journal 11, no. 2, (April, 1979), p. 90.

5 Noah Rosenbloom, "The Threnodist and the Threnody of the Holocaust," in The Song of the Murdered Jewish People, trans. Noah Rosenblom (Israel: Beit Lohame Haghettaot, 1980), p. 121.

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8 Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg, "Introduction," in A Treasury of Yiddish Poetry, ed. Irving Howe and Eliezer Greenberg (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 52.

9 Jacob Glatstein, "Without Jews," Ibid pp. 331-32.

- 10 Kadia Molodowsky, "God of Mercy," Ibid, pp. 289-90.
- 11 Quoted in Sidra De Koven Ezrahi's, By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 138.
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- 13 Nelly Sachs, "O the Chimneys," in O the Chimneys, trans. Michael Hamburger, Christopher Holme, Ruth and Matthew Mead, and Michael Roloff (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1974), p. 3.
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- 19 Yechiel Sheintuch, "The Work Of Yitzhak Katzenelson," The Jerusalem Quarterly. no. 26 (Winter 1983), p 49.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Wladyslaw Szlengel, "Okno na Tamta Strone" (Window Facing the Other Side), in Co czytalem umarłym (What I Read to the Dead), ed. Irena Maciejewska, trans. of poem mine (Warsaw: Panstwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1979), pp. 59-60.
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Sh. Katcherginsky, trans. of passage mine (New York: The
Shoulson Press, 1948), p. XI.

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Czeslaw Milosz, The History of Polish Literature
(London: Collier and Macmillan, 1969), p. 80.

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Alvin Rosenfeld, A Double Dying: Reflections on
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Ibid., p. 19.

CHAPTER ONE: POETRY AS DOCUMENTATION

Poetry often derives its eloquence from the longing of the imagination to bring order to chaos, to bridle the apocalyptic and demonic worlds, and to render the incomprehensible intelligible. In the chaos of the Holocaust, this lyrical yearning sought fulfillment in a whole spectrum of poetic genres, one of which was documentary poetry.

Since in this habitation of death, history was conspiring with the poets in unusual ways, poetics of testimony assumed unusual meanings. Frequently, its purpose was to focus attention upon the various aspects of the crisis, so that activities toward its containment might be generated. Thus documentary poetry often attempted to identify or name the facts in order to comprehend the exploding chaos and to galvanize those mechanisms that might help to cope with or resist it. When despair and terror overwhelmed the poet or reader, some of the poetry became a form of exorcism. Thus naming or describing hunger and grief, for example, was an attempt to control their domination.

Above all, testimonial poetry was a day-to-day chronicle of the unfolding cataclysm. Deeply rooted in Jewish literary tradition, much of the poetry--even that which was written in Polish--takes its analogue, form, and lexicon from such antecedents as elegaic liturgy, the iconography of pogroms, and the general Jewish literature of destruction. Nonetheless, some of the documentary poetry shows unmistakable modernistic influences. Not all of the poetry, however, is marked by the same literary quality. An abundance of literary neophytes, compelled to bear witness, resolved to record the events for posterity. Consequently, there was a spontaneous explosion of folk poetry--a kind of simple Urdichtung and balladry, the chief of which was the kina or kluglid (dirge)--that documented while it lamented.

The testimonial imperative of both the literary poems and the simple folk songs, reflects, more often than not, the collective destiny of the Jews. It eschews the narrow concerns of private struggles and subordinates them to the problems facing the community. Where personal hardships or individual grief are the center of the poems, they usually belong to the author's early writings.

Early attempts to grasp the significance of the unfolding events are exemplified in Wladyslaw Szlengel's "Telefon" (Telephone). Not much is known about Szlengel or the other poets writing in the Holocaust, although some of their poetry was saved. Having vanished along with their possessions, just as did most of the people who knew them,

much of the writers' biographical data is conjectural. In fact, of Szlengel we know more than about most of the other poets. Born in 1914 in Warsaw, he began to write poems, songs, and skits for the stage at an early age. His youthful writings appeared in school papers, while his mature work was published in various literary journals. Shortly before the war, Szlengel worked as literary consultant to and was director of a theater in Bialystok. He returned to Warsaw in 1940, before the ghetto was sealed off. Collaborating with other writers in the ghetto, Szlengel founded and ultimately became the central figure both of an underground literary journal, Zywy Dziennik (Living Daily), and a cabaret, Sztuka (Art). Szlengel died during the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, having produced a large body of poetry, songs, and other writings of which only a handful was saved. But this handful is very compelling, for it includes poetry written during the unfolding events in the ghetto and therefore constitutes a spectrum of the stages of a poet's consciousness in its relation to these events.

Szlengel's early ghetto poetry is marked by nostalgic and often jocular tones, both of which achieved for himself and his readers a measure of distance from an intolerable reality. The inverse relationship between the escalating atrocities and Szlengel's comic temper produced an irony of singular corrosiveness. This discrepancy has its roots in the Jewish folk tradition that evolved a talent to "laugh off

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the trauma of history," as David Roskies writes, by comic juxtapositions perfected by Sholem Aleichem. But Szlengel is also grounded in the Polish literary tradition. His early ghetto poetry shares with the Skamander movement, popular in the first decade of the inter-war period, a predilection for colloquial idioms, a lighthearted poetic voice as well as satiric and ironic modes. His use of macabre buffoonery and the morosely grotesque, both of which dominate his later ghetto period, show an affinity with the poets of the nineteen-thirties known as the "catastrophists." These writers divined from the historical events not only the crisis of the individual and Western Civilization but that of the entire world. In Szlengel's world their catastrophic vision was a prophacy fulfilled. Yet when Szlengel wrote his early poem "Telephone," he probably envisioned, like the rest of the incredulous world, neither the savagery nor the extent of the tragedy that was to come.

A long poem (twenty-four stanzas of four lines each with an uneven rhyme scheme), "Telefon," like all of Szlengel's ghetto poetry, is marked by "unpoetic" language. From the very beginning of his incarceration in the Warsaw Ghetto and his determination to record the events, Szlengel apparently had the prescience to realize that he was writing his "documentary poems" (wiersze-dokumenty), as he called them, for and about the dying and the dead. For them, Szlengel probably thought, high rhetoric was absurd. Since the world

in which they lived could hardly be compared to any other one, metaphors and analogies were highly inappropriate.

Catapulted into the enclosed ghetto, Szlengel projects a vision of it, even in its early days (Szlengel did not date his poems, but we can surmise the dates from the poems' contexts), as a planet cast out of the universe. Suddenly torn away from the world he once knew, his lyric imagination strains to recapture the lost world. But it is crushed by an awareness that for a Jew all lines of communication have been broken. Long-standing friendships with the Gentiles have been dissolved, as the Jew is forced to take "a different road" in 1939. Nonetheless, the poet reaches for the telephone to realize once again that the human nexus he had established with the Poles has been irrevocably severed.

Z sercem rozbitem i chorem,
z myslami o tamtej stronie
siedzialem sobie wieczorem
przy telefonie--

I mysle sobie: zadzwonie
do kogos po tamtej stronie,
gdy dyzur mam przy telefonie
wieczorem--

Nagle mysle: na Boga--
nie mam wlasciwie do kogo,
w roku trzydziestym dziewiatym
poszedlem inna droga--

Rozesszly sie nasze drogi,
przyjazni ugrzezly w toni
i teraz, no prosze--nie mam
nawet do kogo zadzwonic.2

(With heart rent and sick,/ with thoughts on the other side/
I sat in the evening/ by the telephone--

And so I thought: I'll call/ someone on the other side,/
when it's my turn to sit by the telephone/ in the

evening--

Suddenly I realized: by God--/ there is actually no one to call,/ in nineteen-thirty-nine/ I took a different road--

Our ways have parted,/ friendships have sunk in a swamp/ and now it's plain to see--there is/ no one I can reach.)

Szlengel's bitter intoning of his growing sense of despair and isolation are reminiscent, but ironically so, of the writings of the Polish poet, Jan Lechon, whose sense of despair caused him to write the following famous lines:

Nie ma nieba ni ziemi, otchlani ni piekla,
Jest tylko Beatrycze. I wlasnie jej nie ma.

(There is neither heaven nor earth, no abyss nor hell,/ There is only Beatrice. But she does not exist.)

Since Lechon's fame and influence were well established in Poland, Szlengel was probably thoroughly familiar with Lechon's famous epiphany. This would render his influence on Szlengel singularly ironic. For while Lechon's metaphysical loneliness reflects an inter-war form of anguish, Szlengel's mirrors the deadly isolation of the Jew in the Holocaust; and while Lechon's anguish arises from the implacable cosmic void--a form of Sartrean "nothingness"--Szlengel's pain springs from the palpable fullness of an expanding hell. Szlengel probably exploited the ironic juxtaposition of his and Lechon's sense of isolation, showing the glaring absurdity of pre-war influences on war-time poetry and on war-time reality.

In "Telephone," the only dialogue Szlengel is able to establish with the pre-war world is the telephone dial-a-time whose naming of the passing minutes is a bitter-sweet

evocation of memories from before the war. The long cataloguing of simple human pleasures is rendered in a rhythmic crescendo of dazzling, montage-like images. These include the poet's returning from a Gary Cooper film; buying a newspaper while noting the dawn-like neon reflections on the evening pavement; watching the strolling couples headed toward "Cafe Club;" inhaling the piquant aroma of sausages wafting from "Cafe Quick;" observing the after-dinner crowds; and listening to the cacaphony produced by speeding taxis and streetcars, counterpointed by the amplified voice of a popular crooner, Mieczyslaw Fogg. These memories, idealized by longing, increase the distance between the lost world and the infernal present.

Doomed to converse wholly with himself, the poet seeks to defend his integrity against self pity by a progressive amplification of his comic voice. Hence the cadences of the closing strophes resonate with a blend of self-mockery and bitter irony, as he bids the dial-a-time, the only lady who did not reject his overtures, farewell.

Jak dobrze sie z toba rozmawia
bez sporu, bez roznnych zdan,
jestes najmilsza zegarynko--
ze wszystkich znajomych pan--

Juz lzej teraz sercu bedzie,
gdy wiem, ze kiedy zadzwonie,
ktos mnie spokojnie wyslucha,
choc po tamtej stronie.

Ze ktos to wszystko pamieta,
ze wspolnie laczyl nas los,
i mowic sie ze mna nie boi,
i tak spokojny ma glos.

Noc jesienna pluszcze
i wiatr nad murkami gna,
gwarzymy sobie, marzymy
zegarynka i ja...

Badz zdrowa moja daleka,
sa serca, gdzie nic sie nie zmienia,
za piec dwunasta -- powiadasz 3
masz racje..... wiec do widzenia.

(How pleasant it is to chat with you/ without arguments,
without any opinion./ you are the most agreeable, dial-a-time -
-of all my lady friends.

My heart is less heavy,/ for I know that should I call,/
someone will calmly listen,/ even on the other side.

That someone remembers it all,/ that we were joined by the
same fate,/ and is not afraid to chat with me,/ and has so
calm a voice.

The autumn night is pouring in/ and the wind blows above the
wall,/ we prattle and daydream/ the dial-a-time and I...

Be well my distant one,/ there are hearts that constant
remain,/ five to twelve -- you declare/ right you are.....
well, so long then.

Such daydreams and reminiscences as Szlengel's, while
obviously painful, were also healing. They nourished the
starving spirit with a kind of idealized remembrance of the
past. This practice was widespread during the entire
Holocaust period: in the ghettos and, perhaps even more, in
concentration camps. Some of the inmates in both engaged,
whenever possible, in various reveries, composing poems and
songs and recreating in them the lost world as a realm of
perfection. In doing this, they were immortalizing and
sanctifying the past and, at the same time, creating oral
epithets for fugitive tombstones. Moreover, these
imaginative reconstructions had, as it were, the magic power

associated with shamanistic rites. The incantations of the sacred images and the paeans in praise of the murdered family, friends, and shtetl had the authority to exorcise, even if for an hour, whether in the ghettos or concentration camps, the specter of starvation or the terror of the chimney. The listeners knew that the confabulating imagination was creating idealized verbal universes. Yet this did not break the spell of conjuration. Casting out stalking death and evil, even if for a moment, these romanticized verbal worlds returned to the exhausted people the past, sustaining the present moment by purging it of its cruelty.

Writing about human perceptions, Ernest Cassirer notes that adaptation to our world is contingent on our ability to create a symbolic superstructure that intervenes between the environment and ourselves. As a result of this, "no longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances."⁴

Interestingly, such symbolic activity is a function not only of poets and ordinary people in extreme situations, but of those in normal and obviously primitive worlds as well. Apparently, both writers and their readers often seek in verbal superstructures compensations for an intolerable reality.

For the poets in the Holocaust, the paradox is that the painful memory of the past often generated a symbolic past-

future axis. Moving backward in time and breaking through the wall of pain, the creative imagination was able to use the memory of a lost Eden as a possibility and perhaps even a promise of a regained one. Such symbolic processes helped not only to adapt to but also to transcend the wretchedness of the present moment. To remember the idealized past was to strain toward the future, toward the life-sustaining belief in the return of the pre-war world. Hence, the evocative power of such simple, bitter-sweet poems as Szlengel's "Telephone" often had a cathartic and redemptive effect on the poet and reader alike.

Discussing Hiroshima and Holocaust survivors, Robert Lifton observes that the loving ruminations on painful details of their "death immersions" is an attempt on the part of survivors to break out of their psychic numbing. "For these memories are unique in that they enable one to transcend both the psychic numbing of the actual death encounter and the 'ordinary numbing' of the moment."⁵

A related idea is expressed in Abraham Sutzkever's "Di Ershte Nakht in Ghetto" (The First Night in the Ghetto). Written in Vilna, presumably shortly after this city's ghetto was formed in September, 1941, "The First Night in the Ghetto," like most of Sutzkever's war-time poetry, stands in sharp relief against his pre-war work. The latter show refined, often delicate stylistic devices of versification, lyricism, introspection, and a preoccupation with the

relationship between the external and his inner worlds. In the highly politicized Vilna of the nineteen-thirties, Sutzkever was an avowed stranger. His poems, devoid of ideology, were rejected by the popular literary group, "Young Vilna." During the war, however, his poetry was to undergo a transformation. Much of his writing in the ghetto and the forest, where he joined the resistance and survived the war, plays extraordinary variations on the theme of resistance--both armed and moral--and Jewish tradition as a vehicle of that resistance. Most of his poetry written in the Holocaust, therefore, reveals mythic, prophetic, and oracular images which are structured toward a promise of redemption.

Like "Telephone," the opening stanzas of "The First Night in the Ghetto" is an evocation of the bewilderment of a poet the integrity of whose youth has been violated. Yet Sutzkever's poem is mediated by an inner vision and cultural values that are radically different from those of Szlengel. While Sutzkever was anchored in Jewish culture and the Yiddish language, the more assimilated Szlengel was rooted both in Polish and Yiddish cultures. When immured in the Warsaw Ghetto, Szlengel experienced a bereavement at the separation that was alien to Sutzkever. Since his link with the non-Jewish world of pre-war Vilna, Sutzkever's home, was tenuous, he does not bewail its loss. His anguish derives from the terrifying epiphany that the destruction of his people began with the establishment of the Vilna Ghetto.

'Di ershte nakht in ghetto iz di ershte nacht in keyver,
Dernokh geveynt men zikh shoy'n tsu'--dos treyst azoy
meyn shokhn

Tsu kenen oykh fazunken vern shifn in yaboshe?
Ikh feel: se zinken shifn unter mir un bloyz di zeglen,
Tseflickte un tsetroteneh, zey valgern zikh oybn:
Di grihne gliverdicke gufim oysgeshpreyt oyf dr'erd.

S'iz bizn halts--
Es hengt ihber mayn kop a langhe rhine
Mit zumer-fehdern tsugeshpunen tsu a hurvah. Keyner
Bavoynt nit ihre kamern. Bloyz brumendicke tsigl
Aroyssgerihseneh mit shticker fleysh fun ihre vent.

Araynshpiln in rihne flegt an ander tsayt a regn,
A linder, veykher bentshndicker. Mahmes flegn untu
Anidershteln ehmers far der zihser volkmilkh.
Tsu tsvogn tekhter, glantsn zoln mazldick di tsep.
Atsind--nihto di mahmes, nit di tekhter, nit kayn
regn,
Bloyz tsigl in di hurvah. Bloyz di brumendicke tsigl,
Aroyssgerhisehneh mit shticker fleysh fun ihre vent.

S'iz nakht. Es rint a shvartser sam. Ikh bin a
holoveshkeh,
Faratn funem letstn funk un tkhumick oysgelosht.
A shvester iz mir bloyz di hurvah. Un der faykhter
vint,
On-otem tsugefaln tsu mayn moyl mit mildn khesed,
Baglayt mayn gayst, vos teylt zikh oys fun shmatikn
gebeyn,
Vi s'teylt zikh dos flaterl fun vorem. Un di rihne
Hengt alts ihber mayn kop an oysgehoibeneh in kholel
Un s'rihnt durkh ihr der shvartser sam a tropn nokh a
tropn

Un plutsem--yeder tropn vert an oyg. Ikh bin in
gantsn
Adurkhgeoygt mit likht. A nets fun likht baym shepn
likht.

Un ihber mir di rihne tsu der hurvah tsugeshpunen,
A telescop. Ikh shvim arayn in zayn geshlif un blikn
Faraynikn zikh likhticke. Ot zehnen zey, vi nekhtn,
Di haymisheh, di lebendicke shtern fun mayn shtot.
Un tsvishn zey--oykh yener nokhhavdolidicker shtern
Vos mahmeslipn hobn im aroyfgevuntshn: gut-vokh.

Un s'vert mir gut. Nito ver s'zol fartunklen im,
tseshtern, 6
 Un lebn muz ikh, vayl es lebt mayn mahmes guter shtern.

('The first night in the ghetto is the first night in the grave,/ Later one gets used to it'--thus comforts my neighbor/ The green, stiff corpses strewn on the ground.

Can ships actually sink on land?/ I know: ships do sink under me, and only the sails ripped and trampled, are scattered above:/ The green stiff corpses strewn on the ground.

I have it up to my throat--/ A long gutter hangs above my head/ Woven into the ruins with gossamer. No one/ Dwells in its chambers. Only roaring bricks,/ Torn from their walls with chunks of flesh.

Playful was the rain in the gutter in other times,/ Supple, soft, blessed. Mothers used to put out/ Pails to catch the sweet cloudmilk/ And shampoo their daughters' hair to bring luck's luster to the braids./ Now--there are no mothers, no daughters, no rain,/ Only bricks in the ruins. Only roaring bricks,/ torn from their walls with chunks of flesh.

It's night. Black poison oozes. I am a piece of ember,/ Betrayed by the last spark precipitously extinguished./ The ruins alone are my sister. And the moist wind,/ without breath falls upon my mouth with gentle grace,/ Escorting my spirit which detaches itself from my tattered skeleton/ Like a butterfly emerging from a caterpillar. And the gutter/ Still hangs over my head raised above the void/ And from it black poison oozes drop after drop.

And suddenly--each drop becomes an eye. My entire being is wholly/ Permeated with eye-light./ I scoop up the light./ And above me the gutter woven into the ruins./ A telescope. I swim into its smoothness and the eye-glances/ Unite brightly. Here they are, just like yesterday,/ The familiar, the living stars of my town./ And among them--The after-Sabbath star/ That motherlips used to bless: A happy new week.

And I am resuscitated. There is no one to cast darkness over it, to destroy it,/ And live I must, for my mother's good star is alive).

While in "Telephone" the promise of redemption is merely implied, in "The First Night in the Ghetto" this promise is formulated as an unequivocal assertion. It comes at the end of the poem as the poet gazes at yesterday's luminous sky and at yesterday's stars, notably at the "after-

Sabbath star that motherlips used to bless: a happy new week."

This affirmation of life, variously orchestrated in Sutzkever's Holocaust poetry, is not only an act of personal survival, but one of cultural continuity as well. Such continuity is associated with consecration of life (kiddush ha-hayym). In different times, martyrdom in the name of God (kiddush ha-Shem) was the religious obligation. The eschatological justification of this shift of imperatives derives from the fact that only a dying "ember" is left of the Jewish community in Europe. The primacy of individual survival is metaphysically and ideologically linked to Jewish continuity--a responsibility that is communally redemptive. Thus the dying "ember," Sutzkever intimates, will be ignited again; and his dead mother's star, among "the familiar, the living stars of my town," is a symbol of Jewish continuity that, Sutzkever believes, is unextinguishable.

There is yet another purpose in rekindling the dying "ember"--namely, to bear witness lest there be a final obliteration of the very memory of European Jewry. The prototype of dying "ember" as historical witness is a medieval fragment that, as Sidra DeKoves Ezrahi writes:

has survived from Hebrew Lamentation literature of the fourteenth century, written by a man who returned to his hometown after a trip only to discover that a pogrom had wiped out every inhabitant and destroyed all the holy books, except one Bible. This one remaining man, who refers to himself as the "last ember," wrote a brief account of the destruction 7 of his town on the pages of the one remaining Bible.

The impact of the poet's perception of the hell into which he and his neighbors have been hurled is immediate, even if conveyed by a neighbor. The neighbor persona is a device that allows the poet to distance himself from and ultimately to take cognizance of the brutality with which the Nazis established the Vilna Ghetto. The reign of terror was such that it caused the trapped people to experience a form of mental catalepsy which oscillated between a clear perception of the truth and an inability to assimilate it. Sutzkever reflects this phenomenon both in his assertion that "The first night in the ghetto is the first night in the grave" and in the bitter consolation that "Later one gets used to it." The tension between the dawning of an extreme knowledge--namely, the imminent destruction of the Jews in Europe--and the denial of this realization--expressed in the assertion that one can live in a grave--is singularly ironic. For this tension recalls the traditional optimism and pacifism of diaspora Judaism that had learned to adjust to calamity in order to survive. But since pre-war disasters stand in sharp relief against the present assault, the two are implicitly and ironically juxtaposed.

Moreover, there is a form of dramatic irony in Sutzkever's apprehension of the end of the world in which "green,/ stiff corpses strewn on the ground" are assured that life can continue. The dramatic irony derives from the fact that terrible as the situation was in 1941, it pales by

comparison with the conditions in the following years. The same irony is evident in the early entries of Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw Ghetto diary. As early as September 12, 1939 Kaplan writes, "it is beyond my pen to describe the destruction and the ruin that the enemy planes have wrought on our lovely capital.... Dante's description of the Inferno is mild⁸ compared to the inferno raging in the streets of Warsaw." Because of the growing daily horrors, each successive entry reveals yesterday's naivete, while the diary as a whole lays bare the shock Kaplan sustained in his confrontation with the anus mundi. The early writings of Kaplan, just like the early poetry of Sutzkever, reveals a truth most succinctly expressed by Edgar in King Lear:

And worse it me be yet: the worst is not
So long as we can say, 'this is the worst.'

Both Kaplan's and Sutzkever's later writings, however, recall Dante's agitation during his symbolic pilgrimage in hell: his fear of encroaching madness, his failing spirit and revulsion, his moral indignation and concern that he will not be able to record what he saw.

In Sutzkever's earthly hell, unlike Dante's metaphoric construct, nothing is symbolic, nothing "allegorical, moral⁹ or anagogical." Indeed so real is irreality that Sutzkever seeks moorings in such conceits as "ships sinking on land." This oxymoron heightens the irony of the assertion in the catechismal structure of the second strophe--namely, that it is possible for Jews, even when transformed into "green,

stiff corpses," to survive in a disintegrating world.

The irony and the paradox of such assertions arise not only from the traditional optimism of Judaism, but also from those psychic phenomena associated by Robert Lifton with "extreme death immersion" or "death imprint." Speaking of Holocaust and Hiroshima survivors, Dr. Lifton suggests that their sense of vulnerability can be seen in two different ways. One group manifests a heightened sense of vulnerability, resulting from "the jarring awareness of the fact of death," as well as of its extent and violence.... Yet as we have also observed, the survivors can retain an opposite image of having met death and conquered it, a sense of reinforced invulnerability. He may feel himself to be one of those rare beings who has crossed over to the other side and come back--one who has lived out the universal¹⁰ psychic theme of death and rebirth." Since Sutzkever is keenly aware that Jewish history is replete with the ritual reenactments of death and rebirth, he may be drawing sustenance from this cyclical promise, even in the present terror.

It is this promise that makes its presence manifest in the poet's rebellious words: "I have it up to my throat." And it is this declaration that initiates the process of restorative mourning, for it allows the cognitive faculties to comprehend and evaluate the full weight of the tragedy, without which the process of individual or collective rebirth cannot be initiated. The grotesque nature of death, often

of solitary anguish and an isolated world.

Significantly, the lamentation for the vanished world, the poem itself, is the poet's temporary verbal shelter. Much like Szlengel's, Sutzkever's memory is a defense against psychic and spiritual disintegration. Thus the world suddenly destroyed is returned, albeit in ruins--ruins, however that are sacrosanct and canonized into a transcendental spirit: "The ruins alone are my sister." This feminine image resembles the Shekhina, the feminine emanation of the Divine, who was alleged to have shared in Israel's exile and suffering (Megillah 29 a). She is the generative source of creative energy whose divine presence prompts the redemptive "moist wind without breath" to fall upon the poet's mouth "with gentle grace/ escorting my spirit that detaches itself from my tattered skeleton/ Like a butterfly."

The image of the "moist wind without breath" is a metaphor (and such metaphors abound in Jewish lore) of the souls of martyred Jews, the recent inhabitants of the now ruined buildings. They are the Midrashic reminder that the events of Jewish ancestors are a sign to their descendants. They are, therefore, the phantom presence that transmigrates through the ruins to the poet's consciousness. Transfigured into wind and later into eyes and stars, this mystical transmigration of the souls lifts the poet's spirit from the communal grave of the ghetto, linking it with the living spirit of Israel. The metamorphosis of the souls into stars

is conveyed in the evocative images:

Here they are, just like yesterday
The familiar, the living stars of my town.
And among them -- that after-Sabbath star,
The one motherlips used to bless: a happy news week.

The transcendental presence both of the Shekhina and the martyred Jews is absorbed by Sutzkever not only in a mystical act, but one of conscious will as well. This union of spirit and will--a union that reflects Judaic theodicy, reenacted in the Holocaust--initiates the poet's rebirth process. In his organic universe, the murderers remain unnamed. Death is personified as "black poison" oozing from "the gutter," an intimation of a womb. These symbols are transfigured into the all illuminating eyes and a telescope: into life and its womb.

And suddenly each drop [of black poison] becomes an eye.
My entire being is wholly
Permeated with eye light. A network of light as I scoop
up the light.
And above me the gutter woven into the ruins.
A telescope. I swim into its smoothness and the eye
glances
Unite brightly.

In these transformations, the eyes become the living stars of the poet's town.

Sutzkever's rebirth is not only a metaphysical one, but a physical one as well. The dying "ember" is reignited both by the promptings of the numinous souls of murdered Jews and his personal, telescopically focused will. "And live I must, for my mother's star is alive." So the dead and the reborn are united in their consecration of life and, therefore, Jewish continuity. For in the Holocaust, the stubborn

struggle to stay alive was often as much for those who were already killed as for oneself.

Even when documenting facts, Sutzkever's poems derive their power from their spirituality rather than graphic detail. Like many other poets of the period, Sutzkever, eschews the mean and horrific. He seems unwilling to defile his aesthetic structures and, above all, the ethical world of the Jews with the sordid realism of the Holocaust. Moreover, Sutzkever was determined to uphold the highest criteria of art despite or perhaps because of the wretchedness of the ghetto. As Ruth Wisse writes:

Even before the war he had determined that the failure of humanity could not alter the basic criterion of art. In the living hell that followed, the uncorruptable standards of the good poem became, for Sutzkever, the touchstone of a former, higher sanity and a psychological means of self-protection against ignominy and despair. Even beyond this, he seems to have developed a belief in the mystical power of art to save, literally save the good singer from death.¹¹

Although an avowed Jew, Szlengel is not as deeply rooted in the Jewish culture and its literary idiom as is Sutzkever. While Sutzkever sought a vocabulary within the liturgical threnodies and aesthetic structures to record the unspeakable, Szlengel found his language in the endless changes of the ghetto lexicon. He was aware that the register of common language was in a continuous process of change. He saw that familiar terminology often lost its meaning or simply sounded absurd. Consequently, his poems are rooted in ghetto slang. His language is simple, often

conversational, using deliberate Yiddishisms to destroy the perfect diction of his pre-war Polish poetry. Unsymbolic and concrete, unimaginative and sachlich, his images mean what they are.

Both Szlengel's nostalgia, a tone that marks such early ghetto poems as "Telephone," and his preoccupation with the pain of cultural truncation were to undergo rapid and radical changes. His later poems, notably those written in 1942-43, reveal concerns that dominate the poetry of those poets who like Sutzkever are rooted in Jewish tradition. Szlengel's transformation was probably a result of the inverse relationship between the growing atrocities and his intensified sense of Jewish identity--a phenomenon not unusual among assimilated Jews both in the Holocaust and other oppressions. Catapulted from his non-Jewish heritage into the ghetto, Szlengel, like the others realized the bankruptcy of assimilation. His later ghetto poetry shows the dissolution of the lines between personal and communal grief. In this Szlengel reflects Jewish Liturgy of Destruction that tends to avoid individual grief and tragedy. Moreover, this tradition mourns not the individual victim or martyr but rather invokes the memory of communal suffering. In The Great War and Modern Memory, Paul Fussell writes that Judaic theodicy includes no saint's days, and whether it is individual martyrs, exalted leaders or the mass destruction of thousands of Jews, they are all incorporated into Yom

Kippur commemoration services.

Like Sutzkever's, Szlengel's later poetry is in the tradition of the duty of the "last ember" to leave a chapter of martyrology for posterity. As Irena Maciejewska states, his poems--like the notes of Adam Czerniakow, chairman of the Warsaw Yudenrat, and the diary of the famous writer, Janusz Korczak or the entries of the noted historian Emanuel Ringelblum--became the self-conscious chronicles of the condemned. Szlengel is now the poet of "documentary poems" (wierszy dokumentow), the recorder of "terrifying events" (straszliwych zdarzen). "Te okreslenia raz po raz pojawiaja sie u samego Szlengla i w nich zawarta jest najpelniejsza autodefinacja rodzaju jego tworczości." (These descriptions repeatedly appear in the writings of Szlengel himself and embody the most comprehensive self-definition of the character of his work.) In an essay, a form of prose-poem, Szlengel writes:

Wszystkimi nerwami czuje sie duszony coraz mniej
dawkowanym powietrzem w lodzi, ktora nie odwołalnie
idzie na dno. Różnica jest minimalna: jestem w
lodzi nie niesiony gestem bohaterstwa, ale wtracony
bez woli, winy czy wyzszej racji.

Ale jestem w tej lodzi i czuje sie jesli nie kapitanem,
to w kazdym razie kronikarzem tonacych.
Nie chce zostawic tylko cyfr dla statystyki, chce
przyszla historia wzbogacic (zle slowo) w przyczynki,
dokumenty i ilustracje.

Na scienie mojej lodzi pisze wiersze dokumenty,
towarzyszom mego grobowca czytalem elaboraty poety,
poety anno domini 1943, szukajacego natchnienia w
ponurej kronice swoich dni.¹⁴

(With all my nerves I feel myself being suffocated by the diminishing air in my boat that is irrevocably going down. The distinction is minimal: I am in this boat not carried by a heroic gesture, but rather thrown in without volition, guilt or higher law.

Still, I am in this boat; and if I don't perceive myself as its captain, I am nonetheless the chronicler of the drowning. I don't want to leave mere statistical ciphers. I want to enrich (wrong word) future history with a legacy, documents, and illustrations.

I write document-poems on the wall of my boat. To the companions of my tomb, I read elaborations of a poet, a poet anno domini 1943, who sought inspiration in the dismal chronicle of his day).

One such "document poem" written on the wall of a sinking boat is "Rzeczy" (Things). Despite Szlegel's rejection of pre-war literary standards, this tripartite, 126 line poem shows influences of the Polish Jewish Poet Laureate, Julian Tuwim (1894-1956). "Things" resonates with echoes of Tuwim's Bal w operze (Ball at the Opera), a powerful poem of 1936 full of forebodings of the Holocaust. Like Ball at the Opera, "Things" vibrates with dazzling rhythms, the metallic ring of colloquialisms, as well as the ironic and grotesque. While Ball at the Opera is an incapsulated history of the inter-war period in Poland, "Things" is a contraction of the history of the Warsaw Ghetto. Written late (the end of 1942 or beginning of 1943), this poem is an evocation of a Dantesque hell into which the condemned are irrevocably driven. Invoking the grotesque, Szlegel's projection of this descent is not of people but rather of their possessions. In doing this, he reflects the Nazi perception of Jews as having somehow been divested of

their humanity.

Z Hozej i Wspolnej, i Marszalkowskiej
Jechaly wozy... wozy zydzowskie...
meble, stoly, i stolki,
walizeczki, tobolki,
kufry, skrzynki, i bety,
garnitury, portrety,
posciel, garnki, dywany,
i drapiery ze sciany.
Wisniak, sloje, sloiki,
szklanki, plater, czajniki,
ksiazki, cacka, i wszystko
jedzie z hozej na Sliska.
W palcie wodki butelka
i kawalek serdelka.
Na wozach, rikszach, i furach
jedzie zgraja ponura...

A ze Sliskiej na Niska
znow jechalo to wszystko.
Meble, stoly, istolki,
walizeczki, tobolki.
posciel, garnki--psze panow,
ale juz bez dywanow.
Po platerach ni znaku
i juz nie ma wisniakow,
garniturow ni betow,
i sloikow, potretow.
Juz zostaly na Sliskiej
drobnosteczki te wszystkie,
w palcie wodki butelka
i kawalek serdelka.
Na wozach, rikszach, i furach
jedzie zgraja ponura.

Opuscili znow Niska
i do blokow szlo wszystko.
Nie ma mebli i stolcow,
garnkow oraz tobolkow.
Zaginely czajniki,
ksiazki, bety sloiki.
Poszly gdzies do cholery
garnitury, platery.
Razem w riksze to walto...
Jest walizka i palto,
jest herbaty butelka,
jest ogryzek karmelka.
Na piechote, bez fury
jedzie orszak ponury...

Potem z blokow na Ostrowska
jedzie droga zydzowska
bez tobolow, tobolkow,
i bez mebli czy stolcow,

bez dywanow, czajnikow,
bez platerow, sloikow,
w rece z jedna walizka
cieply szalik to wszystko,
jeszcze wody butelka
i chlebaczek na szelkach,
depczac rzeczy--stadami
noca szli ulicami.

A z Ostrowkiej do bloku
szli w dzien chmurny o zmroku--
walizeczka i chlebak,
teraz wiecej nie trzeba--
rown... rowno piatkami
marszem szli ulicami.

Noce chlodne dni krutsze,
jutro... moze pojutrze...
na gwizd, krzyk albo rozkaz
znowu droga zydowska...

Rece wolne i tylko 15
woda--z mocna pastylka...

(From Hoza and Wspolna, and Marszalkowska/ cartloads...
Jewish cartloads were on the move.../ furniture, tables, and
stools,/ small valises and bundles,/ trunks, boxes, and
featherbeds,/ suits, portraits,/ bedding, pots, rugs/ and
draperies./ Cherry wine, big jars, and little jars,/ glasses,
silverware, and teapots,/ books, toys, and nicknacks
moved from Hoza Street to Sliska./ In the pocket a bottle of
vodka/ and a piece of sausage./ On carts, rickshaws and
wagons/ the gloomy motley rides...

Then from Sliska to Niska/ again everything moved./
Furniture, tables, and stools/ small valises and bundles./
Bedding, pots--if you please sir,/ but already without rugs./
No sign of silverware and no more cherry wine,/ no suits nor
featherbeds,/ and little jars, portraits./ They were left on
Sliska/ trifles all/ in the coat-pocket a bottle of vodka/
and a piece of sausage./ On carts, rickshaws, and wagons/
rides the gloomy motley.

Again they left Niska/ all heading toward the blocks./ There
is no furniture, no stools/ no pots nor any bundles./ Lost
are the teapots,/ books, featherbeds, little jars./ To the
devil went/ the suits and nicknacks. Dumped together in a
rickshaw.../ There is a valise and a coat,/ there is a bottle
of tea,/ there is a bite of caramel./ On foot without
wagons/ moves the gloomy mob.

Then from the blocks to Ostrowska/ moving along a Jewish
road/ without big or small bundles,/and without furniture or
stools,/ without rugs and teapots,/ without silverware and
little jars,/ with one valise in the hand/ a warm scarf...

that's all,/ still a bottle of water/ and on the suspenders a chunk of bread,/ trampling on things--herd-like/ they walked the street at night.

And from Ostrowska to the blocks/ they walked on a cloudy day at dusk--/ a small valise and a chunk of bread,/ no other needs they had --/ straight, straight in rows of five/ they marched through the streets.

Cool nights, shorter days,/ tomorrow... maybe the day after.../ to a whistle, shout or order/ again a Jewish road.../ the hand free but for/ water--and a strong pill.

In his projection of the uninterrupted tableau of the daily movement of human possessions, Szlengel shows the relentless contraction of the Warsaw Ghetto. Initially the "Things" moved from the elegant streets of Warsaw (Hoza, Wspolna, and Marszalkowska). Many possessions, as well as their owners, pouring into the narrowing funnel of the ghetto in an endless caravan of human drawn or pushed wagons were unable to find housing; for virtually each apartment had already been shared by several families. The homeless were either frantically seeking shelter or meandering dazed in a state of bewildered exhaustion. Roaming the fetid, crowded, and noisy streets, some people and "things" managed to establish residence against the walls of buildings. But they had to compete with corpses strewn the streets. The swollen corpses with ballooning bellies and legs, having died of exposure or starvation and typhus, were the remains of those people who were earlier driven into the ghetto, dragging their worldly possessions in their "Jewish wagons."

Those "things" and their owners who could find shelter realized, soon enough, that it was very temporary. For they

were forced to move in a rapidly descending succession of streets to Sliska and from there to Niska, the lower circles of the ghetto. As "things" were squeezed into the bottoming cone, they became fewer and smaller. Yet their value was high, for their loss symbolized the loss of life's anchors and ultimately life itself. In resuming the descent from Niska to the "blocks"--factories in which only those who secured permits to work and hence to live worked as slaves--all that is left of the human possessions "is a suitcase and a coat,/ ...a bottle of tea,/ ...a bite of caramel."

Reflecting the meaning of the content in the poem's structure, both the long list of "things that are no longer there and each successive strophe become shorter.

Setting again upon the "Jewish road," the handful of "things" and the decimated ranks of the "gloomy mob" move from the "blocks" to Ostrowska Street. In his poetic compression of the beginning and the end of the Warsaw Ghetto, Szlengel provides cryptic signs intelligible only to those who are familiar with the cosmological system of the ghetto. Ostrowska Street constituted the bottom of the "cauldron," an area of seven blocks into which the Jews were forced on September 6, 1942. The Germans dubbed that area and the "Aktion" Einkesselung (encircling). The apt Yiddish and Polish translations of it were respectively kesl and kociol (cauldron). The psychological appropriateness of this translation derives from the fact that the Einkesselung was a veritable witch's cauldron, a Walpurgis Night during which

all the evil forces were unloosed on the seven square blocks. Having been allowed to bring food and drink for two days, that is "a bottle of water/ and on the suspenders a chunk of bread," the Jews were told that the "Aktion" was for registration purposes. Although few believed this ruse, most Jews complied with the order for fear of being shot. The "Aktion" lasted a whole week.

Szlengel deliberately avoids any description of the encirclement. Nor, for that matter, does he provide a graphic mise en scene of the events that preceded the Einkesselung. He probably regarded silence more appropriate for the unspeakable. To mention "blocks" or "Niska" or "Ostrowska" was enough. After all, as his essay-poem "What I Read to the Dead" indicates, he wrote for the dead who were thoroughly familiar with his allusions. Apparently he had little hope that anyone else in the world of the living would read his work. Yet current readers need to understand his images and punch-line phrases.

Hurled at dawn into the "cauldron," amidst flying feathers unloosed from bayoneted pillows, the bewildered Jews waded through puddles of blood, stepping over corpses. According to German statistics, 2,648 people were shot in the seven days of destruction.¹⁶ In this seething "cauldron" the Jews were made to form orderly columns, "straight, straight in rows of five," out of which 10,000 people were selected daily and deported to gas chambers in Treblinka. At the

conclusion of "Aktion," those who survived the selection and who managed to recover from their cataleptic state and had the energy to summon the will to live were marched from Ostrowska back to the "blocks."

If Szlengel ever entertained the hope of Jewish survival, at this crossroads he seems to have considered that notion absurd. The experience of the "cauldron," from which he returned to the "blocks," apparently confirmed the rumors that the Jews were not being resettled in the East for agricultural work, as they were led to believe, but rather transported to gas chambers in Treblinka and other mass murder factories. Isolated from the outside world and receiving scanty and false information regarding the destination of the Jews deported heretofore, Szlengel, like the rest of the Warsaw Ghetto denizens, was probably incredulous when rumors of gas chambers and other forms of mass murder began to seep into the ghetto. By July 1942, the Jews had little doubt that thousands were killed, but the fact of gas chambers or total destruction was largely disbelieved, just as it was disbelieved in the rest of the world when the first reports of death camps were smuggled out of Poland.

The few witnesses who managed to stagger back from the death centers were thought to be demented, their minds unhinged by the horrors of the ghetto itself and by the anguish connected with the deportations of their families. When the July 1942 deportations began, it was reported that

the SS gave their word of honor to the Judenrat that not one of the deported Jews had been killed. Moreover, to assuage the alarm in the ghetto, the Judenrat was directed to issue a proclamation assuring the panic-stricken people that the resettlement in the Eastern territories was not a lie, as the people suspected. At the same time, letters to relatives from Jews purported to be in Bialystok, Brzesc, Pinsk and even as far East as Minsk and Smolenks began to arrive daily, further confounding the population. These messages, actually written under duress at Treblinka, urged the starving relatives in the ghetto to volunteer for resettlement.

In the absence of a viable defense system and in the face of absolute starvation as well as man's inherent inability to face his own imminent death, the credulity of the Jews was a form of adaptation to an intolerable situation. But the "cauldron" apparently caused Szlengel to have little doubt of the imminent destruction of the Jews. He realized that "tomorrow... maybe the day after.../ to a whistle, shout or order/ again a Jewish road." And at this, the last time, "the hands [will be] free but for/ water--and a strong pill." That pill was poison.

The first part of "Things" is marked by a play of tone, images, and words that suggest a self-implicating attitude--one that is dominated, on a sub-rational level, by the myth of the victim's guilt. This attitude is evoked in the

thematic variations of the grotesque image "gloomy motley," "gloomy mob," "herd-like they walked," and "straight, straight in rows of five they marched." The ironic specificity of the Jewishness of the "Jewish wagons," "Jewish road," and "again a Jewish road," amplify Szlengel's perception of Jewish culpability. Szlengel seems to see this guilt rooted in the status of the Jews as the world's pharmaki, the scapegoats of history, a perception that informs many of Szlengel's poems.

Such manifestations of displaced guilt are not peculiar to Szlengel alone. Victims of other crimes are frequently subject to feelings of guilt and shame that rightfully belong to but are rejected by the perpetrators and bystanders alike. The motives of the victim, criminal, and passive bystander are obviously complex. Yet some of Szlengel's motives can be gleaned both from the unique predicament of the Jews and the role Szlengel chose for himself as a ghetto poet.

Szlengel obviously knew that because the shtetl Jews had little recourse to law and justice even before the war, they were often forced to resist total destruction by appeasement. But at this moment in Jewish history and his personal despair, Szlengel began to regard the policy of appeasement as bankrupt. He was, therefore, determined to reveal this to his fellow Jews, for he felt morally bound to show them what he believed--namely, that the road of acquiescence and accommodation has led to "a whistle, shout or order." Even in this late hour, or perhaps because of it, he wanted to

extricate his people from their historical acquiescence in the face of atrocity. To this end, he held up a mirror, his poem, to them.

Another reason for Szlengel's self-implicating logic is the human longing for reason and causality. Chaim Kaplan, too, notes in his diary that "The worst part of this kind of death is that you don't know the reason for it.... The lack of reason for the murders especially troubles the inhabitants of the ghetto.... People do not want to die without a¹⁷ cause."

The abrogation of causality robs the victim of his own sense of power and his own ability to direct his destiny. Sometimes in his helplessness, he prefers to believe that had he but willed it, he might have exerted some influence over his own fate. Such displaced guilt allows the victim to see a measure of reason in a world he cannot fathom. Apparently, any comfort found in the recognition of one's own powerlessness was difficult for Szlengel to accept lest it provoke self pity. This Szlengel would not countenance. Indeed the bristling irony that pervades Szlengel's ghetto poems is probably a bridle with which he restrains this inclination. The tension between these polar impulses is reflected in the first part of the poem.

The six stanzas are marked by a flow of nearly impeccable couplets and trochaic meter. The nervous inner rhythms stand in sharp contrast to the Apollonian form. The

dazzling beat of the metrical units is augmented by asyndetic lines. The concrete, massive nouns fall almost unconnected, as if in a heavy torrent, getting ahead of the poet himself; and are only held together in the first strophe by three verbs (move, moved, and rides). In the following five strophes the verbs increase in direct proportion to the increased frequency with which "things" are made to move from street to street and in inverse proportion to the decreasing number of possessions. The contrasting syndeton in the first couplet of the opening strophe amplifies the emotional ataloguing of elegant Warsaw streets from which the piled up "things" were forced to move.

Both the irony and the grotesque in these stanzas derive from the poet's bitter awareness that the perpetual Jewish wagons, traveling an endless Jewish road of persecution have come to an end. The ironic sensibility of the poet, who seems to have a clear vision of what he adumbrates, conjures up images of the "Wandering Jew" and a long Diaspora road: a road that commenced with the expulsion from the Holy Land, passed through the first ghetto in medieval Venice, through Inquisitions and pogroms to the last ghetto in Twentieth Century Warsaw--the end of the road.

If the first part of the poem is informed by muffled cadences of the tragic, in the second part these tones are silenced. Szlengel ultimately avoids the tragic, precisely because the tragic was of such magnitude that it allowed for no verbal approximation. Any poetic imitation of the tragic

would perforce become a metaphor devoid of reality. For Szlengel the ironic, absurd, and grotesque are devices more useful in transforming ghetto reality into the logos of speech.

In a Swiftian tour de force (a world in which suits of¹⁸ clothes perform all the offices of human life), Jewish "things" are animated with Jewish life and thus perform all the offices of that life, revenge included. The Jews are gone; but their "things" accrue (narasta) to the forsaken houses, waiting for the coming of the "Aryans," presumably the Poles. The latter will reclaim the abandoned apartments, put an order to the mass of scattered "things," and begin a carefree life. However, lest one get carried away, this vision of bliss is replaced by an image of an unfinished bottle of water and a strong pill left in some freight car:

Tylko w jakims wagonie	But in some freight car
pozostanie to tylko:	only this will remain:
nie dopita butelka	a half full bottle
z jakas mocna pastylka...	with some strong pill...19

The water and the poison presumably belonged to someone who either suffocated in a cattle car on its way to Treblinka, before he had time to end his life himself, or who foolishly hoped to the last moment that somehow he might be spared. In either case what is left for posterity is a legacy of trains carrying people to death centers and a "half full bottle/ with some strong pill."

Moreover, lest the "Aryans" expect to gorge themselves on Jewish possessions, believing that the reductivity and

subsequent extermination of Jewish human beings will go
unavenged, their "things" will shatter this illusion:

A w noc grozy, co przyjdzie
po dniach kul oraz mieczy,
wyjda z kufrow i domow
wszystkie zydowskie rzeczy.
I wybiegna oknami,
beda szly ulicami,
az sie zejda na szosach
nad czarnymi szynami.
Wszystkie stoly i stolki,
walizeczki, tobolki
garnitury, sloiki,
i platerzy, czajniki,
i odejda i zgina,
nikt nie zgadnie, co znaczy,
ze tak rzeczy odeszly,
i nikt ich nie zobaczy.20

(And in the night of awe that is to come/ after days of
bullets and swords,/ leave will the trunks and houses/ all
the Jewish things./ And they'll run out of the windows,/
walk down the streets,/ till they'll meet on the highways/
along the black rail-tracks./ All the tables and stools,/ and
valises, and bundles,/ suits, little jars,/ and
silverware, and teapots,/ and they'll leave and perish,/ and
no one will guess the meaning/ of disappearing things,/ and
no one will see them again.)

Projecting a world of grotesque metaphysical justice,
the poet creates a circuit of energy between himself and his
ghetto reader. In this fusion both come face-to-face with
the ultimate absurd: the deadly isolation of the Jews on
whose behalf neither God nor humanity lifted a finger. Only
inanimate "things," mystically empowered with the spirit of
the murdered Jews (resembling in a parodic sense the ruins in
Sutzkever's "The First Night in the Ghetto"), will exact
vengeance. Such grotesque revenge reflects and befits the
cosmic chaos.

Both the breathless inventory of "things" and the dazzling rhythms, augmented by three enjambents (ll. 1, 3, 7), reflect the agitation and amplify the grotesque in the first part of the poem. Yet Szlengel returns for a moment to the world of recognizable phenomena. This is expressed in the assertion that the metaphysical revenge will come "after days of bullets and swords," an event he envisioned, inspired, and²¹ lived to see in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising.

The ironic, absurd, and grotesque crowd and pressure the concluding four line stanza:

Lecz na stole sedziowskim	But on the judgment table
(jesli VERITAS VICTI...)	(if <u>veritas victi...</u>)
pozostanie pastylka	the pill will remain
jako CORPUS DELICTI.	as <u>corpus delicti</u> . ²²

Contained in this conclusion is a vision of justice and truth, each of which is contingent on the other. Szlengel probably laughed at both of these possibilities with bitter irony. Having been transformed into smoke, but for a ridiculous pill of poison, nothing will remain of the Jews, not even a corpus delicti.

Another poem that reflects the supremacy of Jewish possessions is Abraham Sutzkever's "A Vogn mit Shikh" (A Cartload of Shoes), written in the Vilna Ghetto on January 1, 1943. While "Things" is a historical compression of the Warsaw Ghetto, "A Cartload of Shoes" focuses on one event in the Vilna Ghetto--namely, a trainload of shoes of murdered Jews which was sent to needy Germans in Berlin.

Di reder yogn, yogn,
Vos brengen zey mit zikh?

Zey brengen mir a vogn
Mit tsaplendicke shikh.

Der vogn vi a huppa
in ovndikn glants;
Di shikh--a fulle kuppa
Vi mentshn in a tants.

A khassuna, a yom-tov?
Tsi hot mir ver farblendt?
Di shikh azoyne nonte
Oyf s'nay ikh hob derkent.

Es klapn di obtsasn:
Vuhin, vuhin, vuhin?
Fun alte Vilna gassn
Me traybt undts kayn Berlin.

Ikh darf nit fregn vemes,
Nor s'tut in harts a ris:
Oh, zagt mir shikh, dem emes,
Vu zenen zey di fis?

Di fis fun yeneh tuffl
Mit knepelekh vi toy,--
Un doh--vi iz dos guffl
Un dort vu iz di froy?

In kindershikh in alle
Vos zeh ikh nit kayn kind?
Vos tut nit on di kahle
Di shikhelekh atsind?

Durkh kindershikh un shkrahbes
Kh'derken mayn mahmes shikh!
Zi flegt zey bloyz oyf Shabbes
Aroyftsiyen oyf zikh.

Un s'klapn di obtsasn:
Vuhin, vuhin, vuhin?
Fun alte Vilna gassn
me traybt undz kayn Berlin.23

(The wheels are turning, turning,/ What are they carrying
there?/ They are bringing me a cartload/ Of quivering shoes.

A cartload like a wedding/ In the evening glow;/ The shoes--
in heaps/ like people at a dance.

A wedding party, a holiday?/ Have I been fooled?/ The shoes -
-so familiar/ I recognize them again.

The heels are tapping:/ Where to, where to, where to?/ From
the old Vilna streets/ They ship us to Berlin.

I need not ask whose,/ But my heart is rent:/ Oh, tell me
shoes the truth,/ Where are the feet sent?

The feet of those slippers/ With buttons like dew,--/ And
here-- where is the child/ And there where is the woman?

And children's shoes everywhere/ Why don't I see a child?/
Why doesn't the bride don/ the bridal shoes now?/

Among the children's shoes and slippers/ My mother's shoes I
see!/ Only on the Sabbath did she/ Put them on her feet.

And the heels are tapping:/ where to, where to, where to?/
From the old Vilna streets/ They ship us to Berlin.)

Perhaps most central to both "Things" and "A Cartload of
Shoes" is the metaphoric comprehension of the "Great Chain of
Being" ladder, the lowest rung of which is occupied by
inanimate matter. In the Holocaust this vision of the cosmic
order was turned on its head. For people were either reduced
to the lowest order of animal--exterminable vermin--or
transformed into inanimate matter--soap or lampshades.
Conversely, inanimate things, shoes for example, received the
highest value.

The major difference between the two poems is their
tone. Szlengel's poem quivers with bitter irony and fury,
both propelled by his anguish. Sutzkever's voice, on the
other hand, is muffled by the very weight of his grief. All
intellectual or aesthetic considerations capitulate to his
pain. Although the poems are further marked by different
architectonic patterns, they draw surprisingly close in
diction, revealing similar recurrent images and rhythms. In

his evocation of the Warsaw Ghetto, Szlengel adheres to his documentary grammar, one that uses unadorned language and that derives its images from the surreality of the ghetto landscape. Deviating from his usual elegant associations of images, allusions to scriptures, and graceful vocabulary, in "A Cartload of Shoes," Sutzkever like Szlengel speaks in artless language, drawing his imagery from "the daily bread of his experience."

But even in this, Sutzkever does not stray from Jewish literary tradition. He leans, in fact, on the literary conventions of medieval Hebrew and later threnodies (notably late Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century) that lamented the endless calamities visited upon the Jews in language devoid of rhetorical ornamentation. Perhaps stunned by the eerie sight of shoes of murdered Jews being transported in huge piles to Germany, Sutzkever sought an appropriate tongue in the tradition of simple folk analogues.

The antecedents of the folk character of "A Cartload of Shoes," as well as much of the other poetry in the Holocaust, are the literary currents that began in the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries, gaining momentum in subsequent decades. The early period witnessed an explosion of literature written in Yiddish, the vernacular of the Jewish masses in Slavonic countries. Heretofore, Hebrew was the literary idiom. The culmination of millennia, it produced a great and rich literature. Yiddish, on the other hand, having been disdained by the Haskalah movement

(Enlightenment: 1781-1820)--even if its writers had to use Yiddish in order to popularize the Haskala--lacked the dignity of Hebrew and could, therefore, boast of no significant literary productivity. But in the later decades of the last century, class consciousness and socialist ideas were championed by a group of Jewish intellectuals who in 1897 founded the Bund (The League). They advanced the development of Yiddish literature, seeing it as a natural expression of the proletariat, while Hebrew remained the literary tongue of the upper classes. Moreover, whereas Hebrew literature reflected old religious proclivities, the underlying principles of the new literary ferment were secular. This movement stressed the importance of cultivating Yiddish literature as a vehicle of securing the integrity of the Jews in the Diaspora. The Yiddishists, therefore, having entrenched themselves, promoted the development of a rich and extensive literature, the fundamental phase of which was marked by folk characteristics.

Yiddish poetry--as poetry is wont to do and as Meyer Waxman writes in his History of Jewish Literature--has a longer history than does Yiddish fiction. Since Hebrew was the literary language and Yiddish the spoken one, "it was inevitable that the creative spirit of the large masses should endeavor to find some form of expression for its emotions and sentiments. And as usual, this expression took

the form of poetry, for in all literatures poetry precedes
prose." ²⁴ Nonetheless, modern Yiddish poetry came into its own
later than did prose. It evolved from a folk tradition that
animated the spirit of anonymous writers and went through
abrupt transformations. It produced a variety of movements
that paralleled the development of Western poetry and that
simultaneously appeared on both sides of the Atlantic within
the last century.

Shortly before the Second World War, the Young Vilna
poets produced Abraham Sutzkever. Sutzkever's early
pantheistic experimentations and later brilliant linguistic
manipulations as well as sensual lyricism did not prevent him
from locating an axis between the folk beginnings of modern
Yiddish poetry, earlier medieval liturgical lamentations, and
the tragedy he writes about in "A Cartload of Shoes." In
this, Sutzkever reflects the ethos of his people who, in
recalling historical antecedents, project a vision of hope
for the future and find consolation in their ability to
survive disasters.

Another feature of "A Cartload of Shoes" is its
proximity to the ballad, a genre popular in the Holocaust and
used both by Yiddish and Polish writing poets. This poem
shares with the ballad an unembellished vocabulary and
directness of narrative line. Metaphoric language is
replaced by incremental repetitions of significant words
(turning, wagon, shoes, feet) and a repeated questioning
pattern in seven out of the nine stanzas. The poem's effect

derives from the fusion of lyrical, epic, and dramatic qualities. It starts in medias res, and moves episodically in abrupt leaps, focusing on a single event--namely, the shipment of shoes to Berlin. There are no allusions to what preceded this; nor do extensive descriptions burden the story line. Thus the narrative is carried forward with mounting tension to its dramatic pointe. This sudden twist occurs not at the conclusion of the poem, as it does in many ballads, but rather at its center, as the poet realizes the cargo's contents. Furthermore, the poem is marked by an eeriness that evokes both uneasiness and suspense. These elements are sustained over the lines, including the balladic refrain. The meter is distinguished by its artlessness. The stanza form is a quatrain, mostly of alternating three and two-stress lines with an abab rhyme scheme.

The surrealistic, grotesque, and eerie modes arise as much from the spectral reality that Sutzkever witnesses as from his poetic sensibility. The surrealistic image of a cartload of shoes, "quivering" with their owners' death--as the image suggests--is sealed in time and space like in a nightmare. The sense of the nightmarish is augmented by the suspense and eeriness of "a cartload of shoes" likened to "a wedding/ In the evening glow." And as in a nightmare, the ghostly train, heaped high with the grotesquely tapping shoes, as if at a "wedding party, a holiday," moves with inexorable precision and deadly speed toward the terror

stricken witness as the line, "They bring me a cartload/ of quivering shoes," suggests (emphasis added). The personal pronoun is an intimation of the grief and horror experienced by those who managed (so they thought) to trick fate or take flight from the present destiny of the Jews. Moreover, there is a sense of incredulity, expressed in the rhetorical questions, that the murder of the brides, the children, and the mothers actually happened. And there is the guilt that one saw it all re-enacted daily (as the adverb "again" in the line "I recognize them again" implies) and could summon his will to live or that one deserves the life not vouchsafed the others. Finally, there is the terror that the train is in the end bound to carry one's own tapping shoes to Berlin.

"A Cartload of Shoes" is, in the final analysis, a communal Jeremiad in which the poet laments not only his murdered mother, but also the children, the brides, and the countless numbers of people killed daily. As an eyewitness, then, Sutzkever is the interpretive mediator whose poem produces a fusion of agony and testimony. This lament, like many of its kind, is therefore a synthesis of personal responses to the tragedy and careful documentation of objective fact. In this, "a Cartload of Shoes" takes its analogue not only from transtemporal threnodies and a tradition of ballads, but also from the Book of Lamentations and Jeremiah.

The torment and bereavement of the trapped Jews was expressed in a whole spectrum of poetic tendencies, including

modernistic ones. The collapse of the last vestiges of morality and the concomitant bankruptcy of language (discussed above), caused some poets to seek a vocabulary within the wave of modernistic influences, just as they did within the framework of other literary archetypes. For the convincing verisimilitude with which the poets were able to transcribe the human condition into art and which derived from the availability of familiar images was hardly applicable to a knowledge that had no antecedents and no analogues. Above all, the language they found arose from the spectral reality of the world in which they were dying.

One such poem is Jozef Bau's "Szpital obozowy" (Camp Hospital), written in the Gross-Rosen concentration camp in 1944.

Leza na polkach pryczach,
wychudli, blyszczacy emalia potu
umierajacy "muzulmanie"

Ciezkim, monotonnym krokiem
madejowych godzin,
wzdłuż i w szerz baraku-namiotu,
przechadza sie
w pokrwawionym fartuchu felczera...
"capo-wyczekiwanie"
--i ostatnie minuty oblicza
--i miejsca rachuje, ktore za chwile
zwolnione zostana:
... tych tak... tych tak... tych jeszcze nie,
... tych tak... tych jutro rano...

Widzi: goraczka porzera
niedojedzone przez wszy szkielety
smierci na sprzedaz wystawione
i przez okno patrzy;--na pobliskim
kominie, przysmarzone dusze
tancza z czarnym dymem upiorne minuety.
...wiec przekresla numery, obok kladzie dopiski"
"zmarli na wlasne zyczenie."25

(On shelf bunks lie/ emaciated, glistening with sweat's
enamel/ dying "Mussulmen."

With heavy monotonous step/ of creaking hours,/ treads/ the
length and breadth of the barrack-tent/ in the blood-stained
apron of a medic.../ a "capo-watch"/--and counts the last
minutes/--and figures who soon will/ be released:/ ...these
yes... these yes... those not yet/ ... these yes.. those
tomorrow morning....

Sees: fever consumes/ the not yet lice devoured skeletons/
displayed for death to buy,/ and stares out the window;--in
the nearby/ chimney, lightly roasted souls/ dance a spectral
minuet with the black smoke./ ...then crosses out the
numbers, jots down some footnote:/ "died voluntarily."

"Camp Hospital" exhibits unusual patterns that repudiate
standard grammatical structures, punctuation, and strophic
architectonics. The three stanzas of uneven length and
unrhymed verses are marked by dissonant rhythms and
fragmented diction which trail off into silence.

In language recalling stenographic notation, the first
stanza establishes both the interior of the hospital, "the
shelf-bunks", and its patients, the "Mussulmen." Bau's
language, however, is so constricted that it explains nothing
to those who are not familiar with the world to which he
alludes and the language spoken there. The rigidity of his
vocabulary is a form of silence, one that signals his
capitulation to the incommunicability of his experience. Yet
the poem, even the condensed first strophe, conveys a whole
way of existence.

The image of the "shelf-bunks" derives from the endless
rows of bunk-beds, three stories high, that conjure up an

image of a morgue. At best the loosely fitted boards of the bunks were equipped with a lice ridden, often blood stiffened blanket and an equally filthy sack usually empty of its intended straw. To avoid the lice, the boards were frequently naked. The appellation "Mussulman" was bestowed on those prisoners who were so emaciated and tortured or psychically so exhausted that they could no longer endure the agony of living. They were the living dead. Only their "sweat's enamel" distinguished them from the actually dead.

This "barrack-tent" resembled no hospital known to human experience. The stench alone of the languishing and putrefying "Mussulmen," most of them like lepers, covered with festering sores--wounds produced as much by the ubiquitous lice, the epidemics of scabies, mange, and typhus as by malnutrition or beatings and various forms of torture--defies description. So does the itch of the scabies, a form that settled between the fingers, causing the skin to crack and pus and blood continually to ooze. The scratching was often so uncontrollable and violent that it scraped off scabs on large portions of the body. The mange too was of a special kind. It settled in the hair, the preferred nesting of the lice. It was imperative to shave the head and those areas of the body that tend to grow most hair to get rid of the pestilence; but these vermin nested in the sores as well.

The "hospital" echoed with a muffled din: the whimpering and wailing of those who could summon enough will and energy

to utter these elemental sounds. The prisoners afflicted with typhus or galloping consumption and wracked by raging fever often fell off their bunks. Landing on top of each other, they sometimes brought about an end to their wretchedness. Both these and other corpses usually lay unburied or uncremated for days. The general putrefaction of the dead and the dying was further increased by the barrels into which the sick relieved themselves. These open barrels were generally kept inside the "hospital." Again one is tempted to invoke the lower ditches of Dante's Inferno to convey a measure of the palpable hell of a concentration camp hospital:

When we

were above the last cloister of Melabolge so that its lay-brothers could be seen by us, strange lamentations assailed me that had their shafts barbed with pity, at which I covered my ears with my hands. As the pain would be if the diseases of the hospital of Val di Chiana between July and September, and of the Maremma and Sardinia, were altogether in one ditch, such was it there, and such stench issued from it as is wont to come from festered limbs....

Step by step we went without speech, watching and listening to the sick, who had not strength to raise themselves. I saw two sitting propped against each other as pan is propped on pan to warm, spotted from head to foot with scabs; and I never saw curry-comb plied by a stable-boy whose master waits for him or by one kept unwillingly awake as each plied on himself continually the bite of his nails for the great fury of the itch that has no other relief, and the nails were scraping off the scabs as the knife does the scales of the bream or other fish that has them larger.²⁵

The Germans stayed clear of such hospitals as described by Bau. The "capo-watch" alone reigned supreme in this

place. It is therefore from his evocative point of view, as he stares out the window, that we see the system of "l'univers concentrationnaire," as David Rousset dubbed it. And it is through the capo's consciousness, as he "treads the length and breadth of the barrack-tent/ in the blood-stained apron of a medic," that we perceive the hospital. The term "medic" is as deceptive and ironic a reductio ad absurdum as is the term "hospital." Both words arouse a sense of cognitive insecurity; for having lost their familiar meaning, both words are invested with sinister connotations. The "medic" is a capo, a prisoner designated by the Nazis to perform some of the most odious and cruel camp offices. For this, the capo received a bit more food and some other privileges, among them, a dubious promise of life. The capo is personified as a solitary, lowly demon, himself relegated to duty in the lowest ditches of the camp's hell. He keeps a careful record of the passage of the souls. Thus he "counts the last minutes/ and figures who soon will be released," crossing out numbers and scribbling something in his book of death. For in this mad chaos, a kingdom of strange paradoxes, Ordnung must sein, and the fervent efficiency is such that a careful record must be kept of the "Mussulmen" who "died voluntarily."

The disjunctive sentences of the poem, their elliptical phrasing and suspension of normal grammar and standard punctuations recall the distraught stammering of one who recognizes the futility of transcribing unspeakable horror

into language. Here the lyric voice is constricted. It trusts itself to communicate neither the truths that evade its human understanding nor the grief and anguish that, if permitted to surface, would surely unhinge the mind. The poetic consciousness is so stunned that its ability to communicate its states, as poetry inherently does, is occluded. Only the recording voice is heard, as it stiffly recounts what the eye-witness sees.

Nonetheless, both grief and anguish are conveyed by such pictorial correlatives as "the not yet lice devoured skeletons/ displayed for death to buy" or "in the nearby chimney, lightly roasted souls/ dance a spectral minuet with the black smoke." Although both images are marked by the grotesque, they derive their palpability from the intrinsic surreality of the concentration camp. Here death, for example, conspires with the unloosed demonic forces. Contrary to its traditional eagerness, it is reluctant to claim the souls of the resigned "Mussulmen." Death is therefore personified as a capricious or sadistic customer who must be cajoled to purchase the displayed wares. The image of "lightly roasted souls" suggests that some of the people who were removed from the gas chambers were still alive when hurled into the crematorium.

The evocation of ontological unhinging and the intimation that the unspeakable suffering seems to find its most resonant voice in silence or in language devoid of

metaphor and comparison are conveyed in other poems by Bau --
"Glood" (Hunger), for example.

Maka skrzepnieta w bochen betonu,
--skondenzowana zaplata za dzien meki,
oto chleb.

Osiem zoladkow wypelzajacych przez oczy,
dzieli go na osiem rownych czesci.
z dokladnoscia do jednej kruszyny;
--oto bostwo,
do ktorego modli sie mysl,
poprzez potrojny mur drutow kolczastych.

...a dalej, dalej poza splotem
drutow i meki, podobno istnieje swiat.
Lecz my zaszachowani
karabinami maszynowymi
wiesz strazniczych--nie wiemy o tym,
nam wytatuowano na skroni: "Szach mat!"²⁷

(Flour coagulated into a loaf of cement/--condensed wages for
a day's torment/--that's bread.

Eight stomachs creeping through the eyes/ divide it into
eight even parts,/ the exactness of each crumb;/--that's the
godhead/ to which the thought prays/ through the triple
barbed-wire wall.

...and farther, beyond the braid/ of wires and torment,
apparently a world exists./ But we check-mated/ by watch
tower/ machine guns--know it not,/ our temples are branded
"check-mate.")

Written in 1943 in Plaszow, a camp near Cracow, this
compelling articulation of hunger is almost completely devoid
of extrinsic imagery. The sole superimposed metaphor is the
word "cement" to which the daily bread of the prisoners of
Plaszow is likened. That the coveted bread is
transubstantiated into the very godhead by one of the most
excrutiating of tortures, starvation, is not an extravagant
conceit. It is rather a faithful recording of fact. For in
this world, a slice of cement-like bread was often perceived

as the sole redemption to which body and soul bowed in reverence and supplication. Indeed, starvation here is so intense that there is a veritable dissolution of selfhood. The austere language has lost one of its essential words: "man," and consciousness is an embodied sensation of hunger, a stomach "creeping through the eyes." In this godless realm, the victims are condemned to death not only by starvation, but also by machine guns trained in numerous watch-towers that dot the triple barbed wire walls. This image, too, derives from the language of concentrationary realism, just as does the suspicion that the condemned in Plaszow are inhabiting a land which is disconnected from the rest of the world: "...and farther, beyond the braid/ of wires and torment, apparently a world exists."

The fervid attempts to record the unfolding events in testimonial poetry were coupled with equally fervid attempts to save the manuscripts from destruction. This was achieved by depositing them in hermetically sealed containers and burying them in the ground. Apparently, the writers hoped that the manuscripts would one day be unearthed. Abraham Sutzkever's "Kerndlekh Veyts" (Grains of Wheat), notably the poem's conclusion, expresses this hope.

In the imaginative world of the poet, the manuscripts he hides in the earth become grains of wheat sown for an uncertain future. When overcome with despair, he recalls an Egyptian tale about a king who ordered his servants to fill a gold urn with grains of wheat. This urn was deposited in a

pyramid built for the king. Nine thousand years later, when the seeds were unearthed, they blossomed into golden wheat.

In pensive tones the poet muses:

Efsher oykh veln di verter
Dervartn zikh ven oyf dem likht--
Veln in shoh a basherter
Tsebliyen zikh oykh umgerikht?

Un vi der uralter kern
Vos hot zikh farvandlt in zang,--
Vern di verter oykh nern,
Vern di verter gehern
Dem folk, in zayn eybikn gang.28

(Perhaps in destiny's hour/ Even these words may/ Suddenly grow into flower/ In the light of the day.

And like the prehistoric seed,/ transformed into sheaves of wheat--/ These words will nourish,/ These words will belong/ To my people, the eternal throng.)

Fortunately, Sutzkever's poetry, written both in the Vilna Ghetto and in the forests where he joined the partisans, saw "the light of the day." Unhappily, this cannot be said for most of the literature written in the Holocaust. Although some of it miraculously survived, most of it was destroyed, just as were its authors, both well known and anonymous.

NOTES

- 1 David Roskies, "Sholem Aleichem and Others: Laughing Off the Trauma of History," Prooftexts: A Journal Of Jewish Literary History, vol. 2, no. (January, 1982), pp. 53-77.
- 2 Wladyslaw Szlengel, "Telefon" (Telephone), Co czytalem umarlým: Wiersze ghetta warszawskiego (What I Read to the Dead: Poetry in the Warsaw Ghetto), edit. Irena Maciejewska, (Warsaw: Panstwowy Institut Wydawniczy, 1977), p. 61. Further references to Szlengel's poems are in this anthology. All poems from this anthology are translated by this writer.
- 3 Ibid. pp. 63-4.
- 4 Ernest Cassirer, An Essay on Man, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965), p. 9.
- 5 Robert Lifton, Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima, (New York: Random House, 1967) p. 509.
- 6 Abraham Sutzkever, "Di ershte Nacht in Ghetto" (The First Night in the Ghetto), Di Ershte Nacht in Ghetto, trans. mine (Israel: Di Goldene Keyt, 1979), pp. 10-11.
- 7 Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 21.
- 8 Chaim Kaplan, The Warsaw Diary of Chaim Kaplan, Trans. Abraham Katsh (New York: Colliers, 1976), p. 79.
- 9 Terms Dante used in describing the meaning of the Divine Comedy in a letter to Can Grande.

- 10
Lifton. p. 481.
- 11
Ruth Wisse, "The Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever,"
The Jewish Book Annual (New York: Jewish Book Council, 1979),
p. 28.
- 12
Paul Fussel, The Great War in Modern Memory,
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 7.
- 13
Irena Maciejewska, "Introduction, "Co czytalem
umarlym (What I read to the Dead), p. 17.
- 14
Szlengel, "What I Read to the Dead," pp. 37-8.
- 15
Szlengel, "Rzeczy" (Things), pp. 125-27.
- 16
See Lucy Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews: 1939-
1945 (New York: Bantam Books, 1975), p. 419.
- 17
Chaim Kaplan, "Journal of the Warsaw Ghetto."
Commentary. (November, 1965), pp. 42-45.
- 18
See the sartorial digression in Jonathan Swift's
A Tale of a Tub.
- 19
Szlengel, "Rzeczy" (Things), p. 127.
- 20
Ibid., p. 127.
- 21
See my discussion of "Kontratak" (Counterattack) in
Chapter Three.
- 22
Szlengel, "Things," p. 128.
- 23
Abraham Sutzkever, "A Vogn Mit Shikh" (A Cartload Of
Shoes) Lider fun Yam Hamoves (Songs From the Dead Sea),
(Tel Aviv: World Federation of Bergen Belsen
Associations, 1968), p. 23. Further references to
Sutzkever's poems are in this anthology. Poems from this
anthology are translated by this writer.

- 24 Meyer Waxman, A History of Jewish Literature vol. 4 (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), p. 546.
- 25 Jozef Bau, "Szpital obozowy" (Camp Hospital), Piesn ujdzie calo: Antologia wierszy a Zydach pod okupacja nemiecka (The Song Will Continue Unscathed: An Anthology of Poetry About Jews Under the German Occupation), edit. and intro. Michal Borwicz (Warsaw: Centralna zydzowska komisja historyczna w Polsce, 1947), pp. 56-7. Poems from this anthology are translated by this writer.
- 26 Dante, Inferno, edit. and trans. John D. Sinclair (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 363.
- 27 Bau, "Glod" (Hunger), Piesn ujdzie calo, p. 57.
- 28 Sutzkever, "Kerndlekh Veyts" (Grains of Wheat).

CHAPTER TWO: MORALE, MORAL RESISTANCE, AND CRISIS OF FAITH

Because self-conscious as well as folk poetry had, among Polish as well as other East European Jews, a long and rich tradition--much of it in response to waves of destruction that periodically ravaged Jewish communities--it may not be surprising that the first to react to the German¹ occupation were the Yiddish and Polish Jewish poets. From the beginning, their poetry was a vehicle of moral and cultural sustenance as well as an expression of spiritual defiance that kept the souls of the condemned from dying. It was, furthermore, a quest for reaffirmation of traditional values in a disintegrating world.

That tradition was rebelliously alive is reflected in the very act of writing or composing poetry in the mind and committing it to memory when writing materials were not available. As an affirmation of life, all attempts to write had a measure of success in transcending the wretchedness of the present moment. Since it articulated for many their thoughts and feelings, this poetry was often a means of catharsis, as well as an expression of revulsion and opposition against the oppressor. Hence, the greater the threat to the physical and cultural existence of the immured

Jews, the more determined often was their literary activity. Indeed, after waves of mass deportations to death centers, those who temporarily held on to life in the ghettos, in hiding, among the partisans, on the "Aryan" side, and even in some of the concentration camps feverishly turned to writing. As the poet Michal Borwicz writes:

Po kazdej "akcji wysiedlenczej," kiedy uliczki ghetta
wypelnial krzyk krwawej ciszy, kiedy mieszkania
wialy pustka po tysiacych ofiar, a meble i rzeczy
po nich "konfiskowal" niemecki skarb, na progach,
chodnikach i podlogach walesaly sie strzepy i odpadki
rabowanego mienia. Wsrod nich bardzo czesto mozna
bylo dojrzec zapisane kartki. Wyprute przez
niemieckich rzezimieszkow z szuflad i skrytek oraz
przez nich--jako pozbawione materjalnej wartosci--
podeptane z pogardliwa nieuwaga.²

(After each deportation--when the narrow ghetto streets echoed with a cry of bleeding silence, when the dwellings blew with the emptiness of many thousand martyrs, and the furniture and belongings were confiscated by the German treasury--the thresholds, floors, and sidewalks were strewn with tatters and scraps of plundered property. In the midst of it, it was easy to find handwritten slips of paper. Ripped out of drawers and hiding places by the German marauders, these notes, devoid of material value, were disdainfully trampled by them.)

Like their predecessors, the poets in the Holocaust apparently knew that the objective chronicler of events needs the complement of a truth that transcends historical fact: the truth of the poets. For it is their poetry that reveals --perhaps more eloquently than any other literary genre-- the most precise correlatives for states of consciousness: the human response to life and death, hope and despair. A cogent formulation of this idea appears in Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw Diary:

"Who will immortalize our troubles? The national splendor inherent in religious poetry is not expressed in newspaper reports.... A catastrophe that becomes part of poetry... spreads among the people and is transmitted to future generations. A poet who clothes adversity in poetic form immortalize it in an everlasting monument. And this monument provides historic material from which future generations are nourished.... Poet of the people where art thou?"³

Such mandates and exhortations as Kaplan's were hardly necessary, for most poets--self-conscious and established ones, neophytes and simple folk-song writers--regarded it morally imperative to immortalize the unfolding cataclysm and at the same time to provide a scaffolding with which to support the morale of the people.

This sense of grave responsibility on the part of the poets became itself a poetic topos. Abraham Sutzkever's poetry, for example abounds in such themes. Occasionally Gentile Polish poets, horrified eye-witnesses, articulate in their poetry indignation and revulsion and, hence by extension, moral support for the isolated and entrapped Jews. One such poet, who was to become a Nobel Laureate, is Czeslaw Milosz. His "Campo Di Fiori" and "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" are discussed in chapter four of this study. Another poet is Julian Przybos. Born in 1901 in a small village, he began to publish poetry in the avant-guard Preview "Switch," and was later to join a group known as the "A.R." ("Revolutionary Artists"). Przybos was an avowed socialist for whom, as Czeslaw Milosz writes in The History of Polish Literature, "artistic creativity signified a man's elan toward universal happiness through the realization of

all human potentialities." But Przybos also knew "that an artist's first duty toward mankind is to create good art and not to renounce high standards in the name of any supra-⁵ artistic goal."

These lofty artistic resolutions apparently seemed absurd to Przybos in the apocalypse ushered in by Germany. The following untitled and undated poem, reflects Przybos's transformed artistic standards. Furthermore, it reveals his anguish both as a poet and human being, while it places the Holocaust in its unique relationship to the Jews.

Jestem pracownikiem słowa, które kształtuje, którym władam--a gdy siegam teraz po słowo, zamyka mnie szczerze niepokonane milczenie.

Jestem poeta--ale nie znajduje na całym obszarze doświadczonych przez siebie uczuć--nawet przeczucia tej grozy, od której, gdyby ja dopuścić do serca--staneloby serce.

Jestem Polakiem, który--jak wielu, jak prawie wszyscy patrioci polscy--przerzyl moralnie śmierć w więzieniu gestapo, ale nie może, nie czuje w sobie uprawnienia i siły do objęcia myśla męczeństwa narodu żydowskiego.

We wczesnej mojej młodości byłem żołnierzem, patrzyłem na wojenną śmierć przyjaciół--lecz nie mam w sobie tyle hartu, by móc obiektywnie, twardo uświadomić sobie los Żydów zamkniętych w getto i więzionych do komór gazowych.

Bedac z dala od Warszawy w bohaterskie dni powstania i zagłady stolicy--przecież pojąłem, przekrwawiłem w sobie i myśle ze czcią, bólem i przekleństwem o tej największej tragedii w polskich dziejach.

Ale opuszcza mnie wszystka ludzka zdolność reakcji, nie ptrafie, jestem bezradny i przerażony, ilekroć wspomnę o rzeczy najokropniejszej od istnienia naszej planety.

I nie liczba ofiar, nie to że tyle milionów Żydów zginęło niewinnie--zginęły przecież miliony Polaków czy Rosjan--

i nie sam fakt fizycznego unicestwienia,
--śmierć niezawiniona; męczeńska śmierć była nieraz w dziejach ludzkości udziałem tysięcy--

ale wywazenie ostatniej zasady czlowieczentwa,
zburzenie do fundamentow juz nie tylko etyki, rozumu,
prawa--

ale zamach na ostateczna reszte czlowieczentwa,
na to ze czlowiek, nie majac swojej smierci, smiercia
meczenska cos znaczyl, w imie czegos umieral.

Hitlerowcy smierci mordowanych Zydow chcieli odjac
nawet znaczenie, nawet miano smierci.

Kiedy ogarniemy pomysleniem, kiedy wytrzymamy te
groze moralna?

Pioro moje drzy i musze milczec. Dzis pisać te
słowa w druga rocznice wysiedlenia Zydów z Krakowa,
wiem jedno:

Dopuki nie udzwigne choc jednym slowem w poezji--
ciezaru tej najstraszliwszej sprawy--nie bede sie czul
poeta zupełnie wolnym, tym, który przeżył, a nie umarł
w owym czasie pogardy, meczentwa i walki.⁶

(I am a craftsman of words. I forge them, I master
them. And now when I reach for a word, I feel myself
enclosed in impenetrable silence.

I am a poet. Yet I am unable to discover in the entire
spectrum of my experienced emotions even an inkling of the
terror which, if permitted to reach the heart, would surely
cause the heart to stop.

I am a Pole who--like many, like almost all Polish
patriots--morally experienced death in the Gestapo prison.
Yet I cannot, I feel neither justified nor strong enough to
comprehend the martyrdom of the Jewish people.

In my early youth I was a soldier and witnessed the
death of many comrades in arms. Yet I haven't been tempered
enough to apprehend objectively the fate of the Jews
incarcerated in the ghetto and transported to gas chambers.

Although I was not present in Warsaw during the
capital's heroic days of resistance and destruction, I
nonetheless experienced--I think with reverence as well as
with agony and execrations--this most terrible tragedy in the
annals of Poland.

Yet I am bereft of any human ability to react: I cannot,
I am rendered helpless and frightened whenever I think about
this most terrifying event since the creation of our planet.

And it's not the number of victims, not that so many
innocent Jews perished--after all, millions of Poles and
Russians perished too--

and not only the physical destruction,
the undeserved death; in human history violent death has
often been the destiny of thousands--

but the obliteration of the basic human principles, the
destruction of the very foundation not only of ethics,
reason, justice--

but the assault on the last semblance of that which is
human, on the fact that a human being had some worth when he
died the death of a martyr, when he died in the name of

something.

The Nazis were determined to rob the murdered Jews of the very meaning, the very name of death.

When will we comprehend, how will we endure this total moral disintegration?

My pen trembles, and I must be silent. Today, writing these words on the second anniversary of the deportation of the Jews from Cracow, I know one thing:

As long as I will not lift with at least one word in poetry the weight of this most terrible thing, I will not be a totally free poet--one who survived, who did not die in this age of wretchedness, martyrdom, and struggle.)

Both the word images and the structure of this poem project with precision Przybos's dilemma. Before the war, words were the element with which Przybos shaped his perceptions of and response to reality. As "a craftsman of words," he sought to transmute their components in such a way that they would distill the truth and illuminate reality. Because he distrusted every-day language, he exerted great effort to breathe or hammer into words meanings that liberated them from the triteness imposed upon them. This he did, in the words of Czeslaw Milosz, "by striking one word against the other....," in order "to kindle the spark of a new⁷ apprehension of reality."

It is ironic that the "new apprehension of reality" Przybos sought was ushered in not by the metaphysics of language, his purgation of words, but rather by the flames of the Holocaust. In the face of its unimaginable reality, both the poet's language and imagination capitulate. Although at the time when he writes his poem he has already internalized the various aspects of the cataclysm, he cannot fathom its unique significance in relationship to the Jews. Words, the

tools of his craft, whether wrenched "from their trite dependencies in everyday language" (Ibid) or whose timelessness he seeks "enclose [him] in impenetrable silence." His poetic imagination, informed as it is by a whole spectrum of "experienced emotions" (including his vicarious death in a Gestapo prison, his anguish at seeing both the death of his "comrades-in-arms," and the tragic if heroic Warsaw Uprising) shrinks before the "terror" facing the Jews. Indeed, the very consideration or contemplation of that "terror," which "if permitted to reach the heart would surely cause the heart to stop," obliterates whatever impotent power language might still possess.

Przybos's awareness of the moral implications of the present evil--its unique significance with respect to the Jews and his own impotence as a human being and poet--seems to paralyze his natural human ability to respond to the tragedy. Because he is not sharing their destiny, he is painfully conscious of the chasm that separates him from the Jews. Humbled by the most "terrifying event since the creation of our planet," he feels bereft of the ability to react. It is thus that he defends his human essence as well as his lyric imagination from the threat of total disintegration. He cannot and will not fathom a depravity so heinous that it robs the murdered of "the very meaning, the the very name of death." Przybos probably alludes to death in extermination centers, a system that engendered the warped illusion in the minds of the murderers that their victims

were not entirely human. It is this perverse perception that, among other things, probably helped to expedite the final solution.

The bounded space of Przybos's poem, its metaphorless images and unpoetic structure, seem to congeal into rigid letters, dead words, as his "pen trembles" and he must surrender to "silence." Yet his associations and analogies, his understanding of the unparalleled fate of the Jews break forth creatively, conveying nuances of feeling and moral backbone that are more than facile communication. And so Przybos's sense of moral revulsion, indignation, and anguish, both on behalf of the Jews and the destroyed fundamental human principles, transcend the silence that seeks to enclose him. The final constellation of words--his solemn vow to unveil even with "one word in poetry the truth about this most terrible event"--reflects his prophetic spirit. But these words are also a ritual of expiation that he must enact again and again for having "survived... this age of wretchedness, martyrdom , and struggle."

The image of a poet breaking through the wall of silence is like an anima figure in a world bereft of soul. In the poetry of Abraham Sutzkever, this moral fortitude and determination are a frequent theme. In this he pitted his responsibility to uphold the morale of the Jews and, as discussed in the preceding chapter, the life of his own mind against death. These abiding concerns are expressed, among

other poems, in "Gezang fun Yiddishn Dikhter in 1943" (The Chant of the Yiddish Poet in 1943).

Tsu bin ikh der letster poet in Oyrope?
Tsu zing ikh far meysim, tsu zing ikh far kroyen?
ikh trink zikh in fayer, in zumpn, in ropeh
Gefangen fun gheleh ghelateteh shohen.

Kh'tsebays mayne shohen mit hayishe tseyner
Geshtarkt fun mayn mahmes a trer. Durkh tropn--
Derze ikh s'milionikeh harts, fun beyner,
Vos yogn tsu mir fun der erd in galopn.

Ikh bin dos milionikeh harts! Bin der hitter
Fun zeyere ihbergheloste nigunim.
un Got, vos der mentsh hot farbrent zayne gitter'
Bahalt zikh in mir, vi di zun in a brunehm.

Zay ofn mayn harts! un fernem vi se shprotsn
Gehaylikte shohen in tsukunfts makhshove
Farghikher, farayl zeyer makhtikn rotsn
un zay in dayn tsor zeyer onzogher, novi.

Un zing fun di zumpn, un zing fun der nihder,
Biz vahnen es lebt nokh a trer fun der mahmen!
Derhern dayn kol zoln baynerne brihder,
Di brandike ghetto un s'folk hinter yamen...8

(Am I the last poet in Europe? / Am I singing for ghosts, am
I singing for crows? / I am drowning in fire, in swamps, in
pus/ Captive of yellow-patch hours.

I gnaw my hours with teeth of a beast/ Strengthened by my
mother's tear. Through the tear-drops/ I behold the millionth
heart of the skeletons/ that in a gallop rush from the earth
toward me.

I am that millionth heart! The guardian/ Of the songs they
left behind,/ And God, whose estates man had burned down/ Is
hidden within me like the sun in a well.

Be open, my heart! And know that the hollowed hours/ Sprout
forth in the thoughts of posterity./ Hasten, hold not back
their mighty will/ And in your grief become their herald,
their prophet.

And sing from swamps, and sing from netherworlds,/ As long as
a mother's tear is still alive!/ So that your voice be heard
by the skeleton-like brothers,/ The burning ghetto and the
people beyond the seas.)

Unlike the deliberately unpoetic lexicon, dissonant rhythms and disjunctive structure of Przybos's poem, Sutzkever's "Chant of the Poet in 1943" is in the tradition of standard devices of versification. The meter of the five stanzas is distinguished by its artlessness. The stanza form is a quatrain, mostly of five stress lines and an abab rhyme scheme.

The opening stanza establishes a different aspect of the dilemma facing the poet in the Holocaust from that posited by Przybos. At the core of Sutzkever's dilemma is an agonizing question, "Am I the last poet in Europe?/ Am I singing for corpses, am I singing for crows?" This riddle is directed not only at himself and all the murdered Jewish poets, but also at the other, implicitly evoked, creative energies that might reanimate the conscience of the silent world.

The forthcoming reply to the query, formulated in the catechismal structure of the first stanza, springs from the occasion, calling forth crowded images of death and violence. The synesthesia "I am drowning in fire" and the other images of suffering, "[I am drowning] in swamps, in pus/ Captive of yellow-patch hours," project a hermetically sealed world (a vision pervasive both in Sutzkever's and other Holocaust writers' work) in which neither the silent aspect of man or God will be provoked. The images of violence and suffering leap at us like metaphysical conceits. Yet Sutzkever's language, while imagistic, is not metaphorical. Despite the

figurative synesthesia, the images are signals of a palpable, if new, reality. In the Holocaust, the reign of terror--the burning of the ghettos and people, the putrefying skeletons of the dead and the dying, and all the other tortures--was so boundless and oceanic that the evocation of drowning in them reflects an aspect of reality.

The set of images in the next stanza shows a paradoxical relationship between the poet's rage and frustration as he "gnaw[s] the yellow-patch hours" of ghetto existence "with teeth of a beast," and the tender image of his mother's sustenance giving tears. Since Sutzkever has a deep affinity with mysticism, the mother image recalls Rachel or the Shekhina, the archetypal anima mothers, both of whom appear in various feminine guises in Sutzkever's poetry. The Shekhina, for example, appears in "di Ershte Nakht in di Ghetto" (The First Night in the Ghetto), discussed in the preceding chapter. In both poems, as in the old myth, the Shekhina is the feminine emanation of God in all creation, individuation, and separation from Him. She is the transcendental companion and source of succor to the children of Israel in their exile and dispersion. Giving new life to the archetypal myth, Sutzkever has the generative source of the anima mother transmigrate through Sutzkever's mother's tear-drops. And it is because of their mystic intervention that Sutzkever's ego and poetic imagination transform his impotent rage and frustration into the psychic process of death and rebirth, a theme that abounds in Sutzkever's poetry

including "The First Night in the Ghetto."

One among a host of skeletons, he perceives himself as the anointed "millionth heart of the skeletons/ That in a gallop rush from the earth toward me." His absorption of his mother's sacrosanct tears helps him project a mystical link between God and himself, as poet. Because of it, the helpless poet who "gnaws the... hours with teeth of a beast," is reborn as a prophet of his people in whom God is "hidden... like the sun in a well." But this God-poet axis has secularist underpinnings that resemble Yung's concept of the striving of the ego to establish a relationship with God --one that has the power to transform man into man-God. Or as Sartre sees it, the fundamental project of man is to become his own God.

This form of self-divinization causes the oracular albeit anxious voice of the poet to fill the silent cosmos. Henceforth, he will be "the guardian," if not of his people's lives as God might have been, then at least of the songs they left behind--that is, of the memory of a whole way of life, tradition, and culture, the "estates man had burned down." Significantly, Sutzkever prostrates himself not before God but rather before himself and entreats his own heart to "Be open... And [to] know that the hollowed hours/ Sprout forth in the thoughts of posterity." For it is, in the end, posterity's prophet that he must be, because he knows in the agony of 1943 that this is all he can do for his dying

people. So, in the words of Przybos, Sutzkever tries "to lift with at least one word in poetry the weight of this most terrible thing."

Moreover, his attempt to link "the skeleton-like brothers/ the burning ghetto, and the people beyond the sea" reflects his moral resolve to uphold the spirit of the dying by linking them with the living spirit of Israel, a pervasive theme in his poetry. This form of consecration of life (Kiddush ha-Hayym) not only defines Sutzkever as a poet-prophet in the Holocaust; it also heightens our awareness of the abiding optimism that informs most of the ghetto and concentration camp poetry. His self-exhortation to sing "so that your voice be heard... by the people beyond the seas" might be an expression of hope that some form of intervention on the part of the world beyond the condemned ground of the Holocaust might yet come forth.

Sutzkever's belief in the possibility of salvation arises not as much from his trust in the mediating will of God as from the tradition of hope and faith in continuity that marks the ethos and the history of the Jews. This trust in Jewish continuity often prevailed in the darkest hours, even when God's silence seemed to be most inscrutable. Sutzkever was aware that the symbols, signs, and rituals--the whole spectrum of semiotic structures connected with Jewish theodicy--miraculously participated in and realized the sacred in the apparent absence of God's intervention. These symbols, signs, and rituals, as articulated in "A Chant

of a Yiddish Poet in 1943" and a host of the poet's other works, manage to transform themselves into a vision of divine grace--when in reality Sutzkever uses revelatory language and speaks to the minds and religious sensibilities of his people and himself in order to bolster their morale.

As I noted in chapter one of this study, Sutzkever's war-time poetry, of which "A Chant of a Yiddish Poet in 1943" is but one example, stands in sharp relief against his pre-war work. The latter, devoid as it was of ideology, was greeted with little approval by the popular and highly politicized literary group "Yung Vilna." They rejected Sutzkever's predilection for refined stylistic devices of versification, his lyricism, introspection, and preoccupation with the relationship between the external and his inner worlds. During the war, Sutzkever's poetic voice took on new resonance, producing endless variations on the theme of resistance--both armed and spiritual--and Judaic tradition as a vehicle of that resistance. Much of this poetry is marked by a mythic and prophetic vision that proffers some hope of redemption. In "A Chant of a Yiddish poet in 1943," this hope resonates in his self-exhortation to "sing from the swamps, to sing from the netherworlds/ As long as a mother's tear is still alive."

The very exhortation to "sing" became itself a moral mandate in much of the Holocaust world, for singing and writing were verbal citadels that often protected, even if

temporarily, against moral and physical disintegration. As a vehicle of spiritual resistance such activity is in the tradition of Jewish eschatology and ethos, appearing in diverse writings and commentaries. In The Tales of the Hasidim, for example, Martin Buber cites the following story:

Once when Jews were passing through a period of great stress, the rabbi of Apt, who was then the eldest of his generation, issued a command for a universal fast in order to call down God's mercy. But Rabbi Israel summoned his musicians, whom he carefully selected from a number of different towns, and night after night he had them play their most beautiful melodies on the balcony of his house. Whenever the sound of the clarinet and the delicate tinkle of the little bells floated down from above, the Hasidim began to gather in the garden, until there was a whole crowd of them. The music would soon triumph over their dejection and they would dance, stamping their feet and clapping their hands. People who were indignant at these doings, reported to the rabbi of Apt that the day of fasting he had ordered had been turned into a day of rejoicing. He answered: 'It is not up to me to call him to account who kept the memory of the command of the Scriptures green in his heart: 'And when you go to war in your land against the adversary that oppressteth you, then ye shall sound an alarm with the trumpets; an ye shall be remembered before the Lord your God.'9

Some of the intelligentsia of virtually every ghetto was determined to keep "the memory of the command of the scriptures green in... [the] heart[s] of the people." But one of countless examples of such triumph is provided by Michal Borwicz who recounts a story about a concert in the Vilna Ghetto he heard from S. Kaczerginski, poet and anthologist of Lider Fun Ghettons un Lagern (Songs in the Ghettons and Concentration Camps). The spirit of this event draws particularly close to the one cited by Buber.

The concert took place on January 18, 1942, one month after a singularly bloody "Aktion." Many people in the ghetto responded with bitterness to the the concert, adding the following slogan to the posted announcements: "No Concerts on a Cemetery!" Nonetheless, on the day of the event, the Vilna Ghetto theatre was filled beyond capacity, and the audience quickly realized that the program had little to do with an ordinary "concert." From the stage came some of the most evocative poems of such venerated Jewish bards as Chaim Nachman Bialik (1873-1934). These poems, as well as selections from the works of such luminaries as Peretz (1851-1915, poet and novelist) resembled liturgical laments for martyred Jews. But a seeming non sequitur followed--namely, recitations of some of the most humorous passages from the folk tales of Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916), the beloved author of the Jewish masses. The consternation that swept the theatre was total. The audience could not bear Sholem Aleichem's humor after the solemn and funereal mood evoked by Bialik's poems. Nevertheless, the audience quickly fell under the spell of the inimitable Yiddish story teller. His protagonists' tales of woe were perceived as allusions--however remote in time, space, and intensity--to the sorrow¹⁰ and terror that reigned in the Vilna Ghetto. So the Jews of the Vilna Ghetto kept the "memory of the command of the Scriptures green in their hearts," and in sounding "an alarm with the trumpets" of both solemn and humorous literature, they managed to "triumph over their dejection."

Yet the memory of the command of the Scriptures was secularized by many poets, as evidenced by Sutzkever's "The Chant of a Yiddish Poet in 1943." For the shock they sustained often produced a crisis of faith, although rarely absolute apostasy. Hence in the works of many poets, God is inscrutable, unreachable and unaccountable. Terror, chimneys, and death appear to be consecrated by divine will, and are manifest in the exploding chaos. In other poetry, the religious despair is transformed into outright blasphemy. The poets express the suspicion that the omnipotent, just, and wise God of their fathers has turned his back on his children either because of their sinfulness or because God himself has been reduced to craven pusillanimity in the shadow of the swastika. He is, therefore, no longer able to protect his chosen people. In the first case God's wisdom and justice are challenged, for a punishment that calls for living children to be thrown into flames exceeds any conceivable form of sin. In the second case God is charged with bad faith, for he misled his people into believing in his omnipotence and promise of redemption. Thus in some poems, Szlengel's "Juz czas" (Its High time) for example, the universe is stood on its head, and it is God who, on Judgement Day, is judged by his children.

One of the few poems dated by Szlengel, "It's High Time" was written in December, 1942, probably upon the poet's learning about the gas chambers in Treblinka.

Juz czas! Czas!
 Dlugo nas dniem obrachunku straszyl!
 Mamy juz dosyc modlitw i pokut.
 Dzisiaj Ty staniesz przed sadem naszym
 I bedziesz czekal pokornie wyroku.
 Rzucim Ci w serce poteznym kamieniem
 Bluzniercze, straszne, krwawe oskarzenie.
 --Ostrzem potoru, brzeszczotem szabel
 Wedrze sie w niebo jak wierza Babel
 I Ty, tam w gorze, wielki skazaniec,
 Tam w miedzygwiezdnej straszliwej ciszy,
 Ty kazde slowo nasze uslyszysz,
 Jak Cie oskarza narod wybraniec,
 --Nie ma zaplaty, nie ma zaplaty!!!
 To, zes nas kiedys, dawnymi laty,
 Wywiodl z Egiptu do naszej ziemi.
 To nic nie zmieni! To nic nie zmieni!
 Teraz Ci tego juz nie przebaczymy,
 Ze Tys nas wydal w rece siepaczy--
 Za to, ze w czasie tysiecoleci
 Bylismy Tobie jak wierne dzieci.
 Z twoim imieniem kazdy z nas konal
 W cyrkach cezarrow, w cyrku Nerona.
 Na krzyzach Rzymian, stosach Hiszpanii
 Bici i lzeni poniewierani.
 I Tys nas wydal w rece Kozakom,
 Co rwali w strzepy swiety Twoj zakon.
 Z meki getta, widma szubienic
 My, upodleni, my--umeczeni--
 Za smierc w Treblince, zgieci pod batem,
 Damy zaplate!! Damy zaplate!!
 --Teraz nie ujrzesz juz swego konca!
 Gdy Cie sprowadzim na miejsce kazni,
 100-dolarowym krazkiem slonca
 Ty nie przekupisz wartownika lazni.
 I kiedy kat Cie popedzi i zmusi,
 Zagna i wypchnie w komore parowa,
 Zamknie za Toba hermatyczne wieka,
 Goraca para zacznie dusic, dusic,
 I bedziesz krzyczal, bedziesz chcial uciekac--
 Kiedy sie skoncza juz konania meki,
 Zawloka, wrzuca, tam potwornym dolem
 Wyrwa Ci gwiazdy--zlote zeby z szczeki--
 A potem spala.
 I bedziesz popiolem.11

(Its high time! High time!/ Endlessly threatened with a day
 of reconning!/ Enough prayers and penance./ Today You will
 face our judgement/ And humbly await our verdict./ We'll
 strike Your heart with a mighty rock of blasphemous,
 terrifying, bloody charges./ --With the sharpness of
 hatchets, with the clash of swords they'll sunder the skies
 like the tower of Babel/ And You, up there, almighty

convict,/ There in the awesome silence of the galaxies,/ You will hear every single word of ours,/ When sentenced by us, Your chosen people,/ There is no absolution, there is no absolution!!!/ That sometime in the distant past,/ You delivered us from Egypt and brought us to our land,/ Will change nothing! will change nothing!/ We won't forgive You now/ That You have delivered us into the hands of the killers--/ Because during the millennia we had been Your loyal children./ With Your name on our lips each one of us expired/ In the circuses of ceasars, in the circus of Nero./ On the crosses of the Romans, pyres of Spain/ Whipped, cursed and scorned./ And You delivered us into the hands of the Cossacks,/ Who, into shreds, tore the Old Testament./ For tortures in the ghetto, specter of the gallows/ We, the degraded, we, the exhausted,/ For death in Treblinka, bent under the whip,/ We'll pay You back!! We'll pay You back!!!/ - You won't escape Your end now!/ When we'll bring You to the place of execution,/ You won't bribe the guard of the showers,/ With the sun-like glitter of a hundred-dollar coin./ And when the executioner will chase and force You,/ Drive and push You onto the steam room floor,/ And seal behind You the hermetic door,/ Hot vapors will choke You, You'll see,/ And You will scream and weep and want to flee-- / And when Your death agony will come to an end,/ You'll be dragged, and in a monstrous pit land,/ Then they'll tear out your stars--the gold teeth from Your flesh--/ Then they will burn you./ And you'll be ash.)

Szlengel's bitter invective is rooted in traditional liturgy, notably in the right to judge God for his trespasses. The logic of such an inversion has its antecedents in Hasidic, Kabbalistic, and rabbinic literature. The right to judge God is implicit in the relationship between God and Israel--a relationship established by God's insistence that Israel accept his covenant (Deuteronomy: 5:3). Thus, as Byron Sherwin writes, "In Jewish law, God can be tried for his crimes because he is party to an agreement.... In this respect he is a "person" in Jewish law. The trials of God narrated by Hasidic literature [and] Holocaust literature... are not only aggadically [theologically] defensible, but halakhically [legally]

viable. As man is required to bear witness before God, he may also bear witness against God.¹² Thus the protests, even when expressing anger and disappointment, are rooted in faith. It is precisely because of the accusations that they are expressions of reverence and love for God and trust in his covenant. They are, further, signals of belief that disasters are followed by salvation and are, therefore, inherently transient.

Horried by the systematic murder of the Jews, Szlengel walks the thin line between this faith and apostasy, holding on to God only by dint of his rage against God and the antiworld which seems to be his creation. Although he mirrors the tradition initiated by Abraham--one that expects God to do justice by his Chosen People ("Shall not the Judge of the earth do justice?" (Gen. 18:25)--in the current crisis Szlengel finds it fit to stand that whole tradition on its head. Thus he is not merely indicting God for not having honored the terms of his covenant, nor merely hurling execrations at him ("We'll strike your heart with a mighty rock of blasphemous, terrifying, bloody charges"), but actually punishing him with the very fate of his chosen people. But even in his relegation of God to the status and hence fate of the Jew, Szlengel does not reject divine existence. He rather inverts the belief that God's divinity is a function of his omnipotence, benevolence, and justice--however tempered they may be by his wrath.

The inversion of the traditional conception of God seems forced upon the poet by God's actions which resemble the ingratitude and cruelty that are peculiar to man. For in their exile from the land into which God had delivered them, the Jews had served their host countries in secular proportion to the way they served God. Yet either with God's acquiescence, complicity or active participation, as Szlengel charges, they invariably rejected the Jews, often expelling or murdering them "In the circuses of ceasars, in the circus of Nero./ On the crosses of the Romans, pyres of Spain/ Whipped, cursed, and scorned./ ...delivered... [by God] into the hands of the Cossacks,/ Who into shreds tore the Old Testament." And if this were not enough, Szlengel charges, God has "delivered us into the hands of the killers--/ Because during the millennia we had been your loyal children."

Implicit in this bitter accusation is a form of divine perversity--a perversity that is manifest in God's punishing the Jews not because they were refractory but rather because they were "loyal children." Szlengel was, no doubt, familiar with the terms of the covenantal structure. He knew that it contained both a promise of redemption and retribution, each of which was commensurate with the Jews' adherence to or violation of the covenant. But as Szlengel sees it, only God's curse and not his blessing had been fulfilled. His professions of love for his Chosen People as articulated in the prayer book: "With everlasting love hast

thou loved the house of Israel" are a blatant contradiction to the tortures he has inflicted upon them during the centuries of exile. These tortures have now culminated in God's complicity in the total destruction of his children, a perception that dominated the thinking of Szlengel, as well as that of many other people, when "It's High Time" was written. The final blow to the covenantal relation between God and Israel, Szlengel implies, is that total destruction of the Jews. This violates the promise that regardless of the transgressions, God's retribution would not include the absolute obliteration of the Jews; a remnant would always survive. To the despairing Szlengel, who witnessed the deportation of most of the Warsaw Ghetto Jews, including his family and friends, to the ovens of Treblinka, this promise seemed apocryphal.

Moreover, according to classical Midrashic tradition, two conditions are necessary for redemption: either total righteousness or total wickedness of humankind. Clearly, to the religious sensibilities of Szlengel, as well as that of other writers in the Holocaust, both conditions were realized. As they saw it, the Jews sacrificed on the altars of the world with God's name on their lips, were wholly innocent--an innocence that stems from the inherent saintliness of Jews who die, as Maimonides is alleged to have said, for no other reason than their Jewishness. The Nazis and Nazidom, on the other hand, were wholly guilty. Yet

neither condition could call forth the intervention of God. In Dos Lid Funem Oysgekhargetn Yiddishn Folk (1944) (The Song of the Murdered Jewish People) Yitzhak Katzenelson expresses the idea of intrinsic Jewish innocence--one that is ultimately godlier than God--in the following imprecations:

Don't you know us, recognize us? Have we changed so?
Are we so different? We are the same Jews we were,
Even better....

... all the martyred Jews taken to their death,
the millions murdered here--

They are better. They suffered more and were purified
here in exile.
How can a great Jew of long ago be compared with
a small, simple, common Jew
In present-day Poland, Lithuania, Volhynia? In every
one of them
A Jeremiah wails, a tormented Job cries, a disillusioned
king intones Ecclesiastes...

...An entire crucified, grief-laden people
Is about to enter [the heavens]. O any one of my
murdered children is fit to be their God!13

Szlengel rages at God because he perceives God as perverse, impotent, and malevolent. He does not walk with the righteous and penitent Jews, but rather with the diabolical Germans, as the Nazis took pleasure in reminding the Jews. That "sometime in the distant past," Szlengel vituperates, God "delivered us from Egypt and brought us to our land./ Will change nothing! Will change nothing!" There is no absolution even for God--or perhaps because he is God-- for such an abrogation of the basic covenantal terms. "The day of reckoning" with which God had "endlessly threatened" the Jews was ushered in with unmediated and unexpected vengeance. Indeed the day of reckoning itself was

unexpected. For as Szlengel insists, it is not the Jews, sacrificed in ritualistic auto-da-fes as well as spontaneous pogroms with God's name on their lips, who have been refractory.

Perhaps the most elaborate images in this poem are God's culpability: his perversity, malevolence, and impotence. Szlengel conveys with the immediacy of an eyewitness the sustained attempt to assimilate into poetic and human consciousness as well as into Jewish history a catastrophe that stands outside these realms. The success of this attempt is contingent on the belief in divine complicity and malevolence. In The Jewish Return to History: Reflection in the Age of Auschwitz and a New Jerusalem, Emil Fackenheim writes that the classical pre-Holocaust Midrash was aware of the discrepancy between God's omnipotence and omnibenevolence and a world that takes its worldliness precisely from its opposition to these divine attributes. For the human world contains human attributes: evil and freedom. In the framework of classical Jewish life, however fraught it had always been with endless calamities, this tension was accepted as one of the paradoxes of life. But for Szlengel the catastrophe that has swallowed up most of Europe's Jews stands outside any recognizable or assimilatable tragedy.

Szlengel sees--just as Katzenelson does and as Jacob Glatstein, writing after the Holocaust in "My Brother Refugee" notes--that the Jews had been godlier than God.

Certainly, they had been more loyal to him and his covenant than he had been to both of them. For whereas for "millennia we had been your loyal children," as Szlengel bitterly writes, expiring "with your name on our lips, "God had "delivered us into the hands of the killers," into the terror of the ghetto and death in Treblinka. The dawning of this knowledge is enough to make Szlengel hurl into "the awesome silence of the galaxies" a verdict of death. "Its high time" that the "Almighty sentenced one" be judged "and humbly await our verdict" both for the terrible death and the degradation of his loyal children. "It's high time," too, that he "hear every single word of ours," which will "sunder the skies like the tower of Babel." God's threats of "a day of reckoning" will now come to an end, even as his chosen people and he himself will come to an end. For as Szlengel implies and Glatstein explicitly states in another poem, "Without Jews there is no Jewish God./ If we leave this world/ The light will go out in your tent."

In the imaginative world of Szlengel, the "degraded" and "exhausted" Jews will avenge themselves against their refractory God. But their retribution will go beyond the mere bearing of witness against their revered adversary. Nor will the Jews invoke the tradition of mere accusations against or quarrel and pleas with God, all of which provided solace and sustained faith in the past. "Enough prayers and penance." Paradoxically, while Szlengel rejects the tradition of pleas and contentions--i.e., dialogue with God,

the structure of his poem reflects it. For in it, Szlengel establishes a dialogue with God, even if the denouement of it deviates sharply from tradition. Paradoxical also is the very deviation, because, reflecting Midrashic tradition, Szlengel shows implicitly the irrevocable link that ties the fate of God to that of his people.

On some level, Szlengel's poem is a modern--perhaps uniquely Holocaust and grotesque--derivative of the traditional midrash. Like its classical antecedents, it attempts to comprehend and interpret an apocalyptic event the consequences of which justify the questioning and rejection of divine purpose. Reflecting the midrashic canon, the poem is rooted in historical fact, and central to it is communal experience that includes elements of realism and the miraculous. But the miracle is not God's. Consistent with his inversion of the cosmic order, it is Szlengel, the modern and somewhat absurd representative-prophet of his people whose miracle it is.

Demonstrating the inscrutable malevolence of God and the irredeemable catastrophe of the Jews, Szlengel sentences God to a Jewish death in Treblinka. Thus God will not only share the destiny of his people, but he will be also paid in kind for his bad faith, as Szlengel iterates in the acrimonious anaphora, "We'll pay you back!! We'll pay you back!!" And so the Jews will deliver their transgressing God "to the place of execution," just as he had delivered them before. Since

aggadically and halakhically, God can be regarded as having been implicated as a "person" (Sherwin) in history and since the results of his actions are monstrous, "He won't escape... [his] end now!"

The logical conclusion of both divine reductivity and divine necessity to share in the fate of the Jews is evoked in the image of God failing to "bribe the guard of the showers,/ With the sun-like glitter of a hundred-dollar coin." The pressure of emotion contained in this and the ensuing images bears witness both to the panic and hope with which the victims, who can no longer speak for themselves, died in the "steam room" of Treblinka. Intuiting, rather than knowing--at the early stages of Treblinka's history--the demise that awaited them, the victims tried to bribe the guards with whatever treasures they saved for extreme situations. The guards, of course, never failed to accept the bribes, sending the somewhat reassured Jews into "showers," as they were led to believe. Szlengel's carefully chosen words--his deliberate avoidance of the words gas and gas chambers with and in which, respectively, the "Almighty, sentenced one" will die--adumbrate the naivete of the victims and the lies of the murderers. Nonetheless, the euphemistic appositives, "the steam room floor," the sealed "hermetic door," and the "hot vapors [that] will choke you, you'll see,/ And you will scream and weep and want to flee," convey the protracted death agony of the victims. At the same time they are an intimation of the grief of the living, the poet

who writes about it and who can never really cease thinking about the torment of his people. The rage that marks these lines springs as much from this anguish as from the anger directed at God for allowing such atrocities.

The sensibility of the poet, who seems to have a clear vision of what he describes, results in an amplification of the explicit images of God's death and implicit ones of that of the Jews. The description of death is divided into several sections, each of which allows for renewed beginnings of its agony. The effect of the images derives from their copious reinforcement and skillful control of actions and feelings, all of which strike us with continually augmented power. The amassing of the different stages of death in Treblinka, including terror at the sudden realization on the part of the duped victims that the "vapors" choking them are not steam or water from the showers, culminates in the poet's lingering on the image of the emasculated God who like his helpless people "scream[s] and weep[s] and tr[ies] to flee." Amplifying further the impotence of the convicted Jewish God dying a Jewish death in Treblinka, the poem ends in a torrent of fury, augmented by dazzling rhythms. The images of the dead God who will "be dragged and in a monstrous pit land," whose "stars--the gold teeth from... [his] flesh" will be torn out, and who like his children will "burn... and... be ash" crowd and pressure the conclusion of the poem, reminding us again of the passionate anger that characterizes a body of

poetry of which "It's High Time" is an example.

Although the role of God in this supreme catastrophe felled a heavy blow on Szlengel's morale, it did not destroy it. Like most of the ghetto Jews, he was determined to carry on despite the destruction of religious moorings and hence familiar norms of value. Rebelling against a cosmic order that is challenged by the reality of the ghetto and Treblinka, the poet, like the other Jews, seemed determined to live or to die not in the name of God, but despite him. Perhaps at this crossroads, some of the Jews felt that to worship God was to betray the murdered. For as the poet, Yitzhah Katzenelson put it, it is "All the better that there is no God... To be sure, it's bad without Him, very bad./
But if He existed it would be even worse!"¹⁴

If neither Szlengel, Katzenelson, Sutzkever nor any other poet could invent new values to enable them to restore order to either their own or their reader's lives, at least, by continuing to write, they often succeeded in keeping at bay the despair that probably would have helped to expedite their destruction. Thus like Orpheus, the poets gained passage for themselves (and their readers) through their songs. Tzivia Lubetkin, one of the leaders of the resistance movement in the Warsaw Ghetto, writes that the creativity of the poets was "evidence that despite everything, the Nazis couldn't break our spirit; there were still creative forces amongst us. Even the most realistic, who prophesied catastrophe thought: 'perhaps we will not be overcome'."¹⁵

Such established poets as Szlengel, Katzenelson or Sutzkever, gave frequent readings of their works at various private and public gatherings. The public readings were sponsored by clandestine cultural organizations that proliferated in the larger ghettos. In the Warsaw Ghetto, for example, IKOR (Yiddishe Kulturorganizatsye) (The Yiddish Cultural Organization) and the Zionist-Socialist DROR (Freedom) undertook a wide spectrum of literary and theatrical productions, concerts, ballet, and lectures. Perhaps the most striking productions involved children. Under the tutelage of experienced actors and choreographers, the children dazzled the audience with their creativity. The proceeds derived from these performances were almost always earmarked for soup-kitchens.

IKOR established secret, central Jewish archives. About twenty boxes of documents concerning the martyrology of Polish Jews, as Borwicz writes in Piesn ujdzie calo, were collected by the archivists and buried under the ruins of the fighting ghetto.¹⁶ In the Vilna Ghetto, YIVO (Yiddishe Visenshaftlikhe Organizatsye (Yiddish Scientific Institute), was engaged in similar activities. Some of the hidden treasure of both organizations was recovered after the war. There was, furthermore, a vital Yiddish and Polish underground press, as well as hectographic printing of various literary works, published by such organizations as Dror.

Libraries and literary cafes were an integral part of the ghetto scene, just as were street singers. These famished, half-naked minstrels improvised songs that dealt with the cataclysmic events and the Jewish response to them. The street singers were ingenuous word coiners, and their songs are testimony to the endless linguistic changes brought about by the growing brutality. As discussed in the preceding chapter, neologisms were a commonplace, and both familiar language and idiomatic expressions were either rendered meaningless or else assumed derisive connotations. Not only was common terminology corrupted by Nazi-Deutsch, but by ghetto and concentration camp slang of both Yiddish and Polish provenance.

Rubinsztajn, the notorious Warsaw Ghetto madman-fool and master punster, was particularly adept at coining new words and making droll puns. Here are some of the pithy apothegms in the Yiddish dialect of Warsaw, I heard Rubinsztajn chant as he begged in the streets of the ghetto: "Alle glaakh--oorhem n'raakh. Geb nish ahvek d'bonne!" (Rich and poor--all's equal. Don't give up your ration card). These were particularly appropriate maxims, for in the eyes of the Nazis all Jews were equally guilty and, hence, equally punished. The trick, as Rubinsztajn counseled, was to hang on to one's ration card, here meant as a metaphor for life. Thus like the poets and such spiritual leaders as rabbis, the wise ghetto fool exhorted the passersby to live. The following is

another example of his terse wit:

A groshn iz goonish,
A tsvayer iz goonish,
A dryer iz goonish,
A fihrrer zol paygern!

(A penny ain't nothin',/ two ain't nothin',/ three ain't nothin',/ four [which in the Warsaw dialect sounded like the Fuhrer] must drop dead!)

Although fearful of such open audacity, the onlookers silently cheered on the clown.

Typically, the street songs and sometimes even the more literary poems were sung to popular and banal melodies. The juxtaposition between the highly charged ghetto poems and the sentimental tunes was startling. The irony was especially bitter when carefully wrought poetic diction or even artless songs of despair or hope or moral didacticism stood in sharp contrast to a vulgar love tune. The dissonance made more emphatic the chasm between the landscape of endless terror and a world where sentimental songs had been and still were being crooned in nightclubs. The following unpublished excerpt of a song, written by an anonymous woman and very popular in the Warsaw Ghetto, is an example of this genre:

Swiat w grozy sie wali,
pozoga plonie.
Juz nic nie ocali,
Juz wszystko tonie.

(The world collapses in ruins,/ Immolated in the conflagration./ Nothing will save it,/ All drowns in the devastation.)

The young song writer witnesses the literal incineration of her universe, but she cannot fathom it. Nor can she understand the cosmic silence that envelops her burning

world:

O ludzie gdzie sa sumienia,
Gdzie wasze serca i duszy tresc?
Kiedy sie skoncza cierpienia,
Kto to moze dluziej tak zniesc?¹⁷

(O people where is your conscience,/ Where are your hearts
and divine essence?/ When will this suffering come to an
end,/ Who can longer under it bend?)

This simple rhyming lament, devoid as it is of any other
aesthetic compulsion, iterates in the following strophes both
the intolerable agony and terror and the impossible task of
recording the suffering. But this ingenue writes and sings--
by their very nature acts of affirmation and hope. In this
she mirrors the teachings of religious tradition which, as
Lucy Dawidowicz writes, were incorporated in the folk wisdom:
"A Jew lives with hope." "While there is life, there is
hope." "Even when the slaughtering knife is at your
throat, don't lose hope." "As long as you draw breath, don't
lose hope" or "don't think of the grave."¹⁸ One might add:
"When does a Jew sing? When he is good and hungry" or "Why
is the Jew still around? Because he is good and stubborn."
Dawidowicz further notes that these teachings, "permeating
every ghetto in Eastern Europe, supplied the antidote to
depression and despair. Everywhere the phrase "hold on" and
"hold out" epitomized the value of life and survival."¹⁹

This sanctification of life was in itself a moral
mandate. As an example of spiritual defiance, it was
cogently articulated in the clandestine culture of the
ghettos. In the Vilna Ghetto, not only did this secret

culture flourish, but in 1942 prizes were awarded for the best sculpture, poetry and drama. Such organizations as CENTOS in Warsaw established clandestine schools, including higher education. Both the soup kitchens and the children's homes, proliferating in the ghettos, were often a front for these schools. There were, in addition, numerous "private schools" (complety), consisting of small groups (three-to-five) children and teachers who met for instructions in the homes of the students and teachers on alternating days. The number of children and teachers alike invariably dwindled, for they were either deported or died from malnutrition and exposure. Certainly, in the Warsaw Ghetto by the middle of 1942 most of the "complety" disappeared, although there were still some obstinate cases of instruction even in the bunkers as late as April 1943. But these involved only one or two children and a stray teacher who happened to find shelter in one of these catacombs.²⁰

Built in the secrecy of night, mostly in the cellars of ghetto tenements by "prudent" people who, as Szlengel writes, believed in outlasting the war (*wierzyli w przetrwanie* [What I Read to the Dead 38]), these hide-outs began to crop up in the Warsaw Ghetto by the end of 1942. Each shelter--some of them quite ingenious and elaborate--was initially intended for two or three families. However, at the time of the uprising, most were open both to the ghetto combatants and to those shelterless people who got wind of them. Among the latter were solitary individuals whose families had already

disappeared. Some of them were less resented because they were able to render a useful service, such as teaching, for example. Writing about this period in "What I Read to the Dead," Szlengel conveys the hope and naivete as well as despair and frenzy of the builders of these places.

Sutzkever, on the other hand, evokes the morale of teachers and pupils alike in a poem titled "Di Lererin Mirhe" (The Teacher, Mirhe).

In his narrative poem, "What I Read to the Dead," Szlengel projects a vision of the obliteration of twenty centuries of Western Civilization and a return to the Cave Age. This he does as he reviews and classifies the poetry he wrote for those who had vanished:

Zwozi sie cement, cegly, noce rozbrzmiewaja
stukiem mlotow i oskardow. Pompuje sie wode, robi
sie studnie podziemne. Schrony. Mania, ped, nerwice
serca getta warszawskiego.
Swiatlo, kable podziemne, przebywanie wylotow,
znow cegly, sznury, piach... Duzo piachu... Piach...
Nary, prycze. Aprowizacja na miesiace.
Przekresla sie elektrycznosc, wodociagi, wszystko.
Dwadziescia wiekow przekreslonych przez pejcz esesmana.
Epoka jaskiniowa. Kaganki. Studnie wiejskie. Długa
noc. Ludzie wracaja pod ziemie.
Przed zwierzetami.
A za oknem coraz wyzsze slonce.
Wyjatkowo cieply luty.
Przegladam i segreguje wiersze pisane dla tych,
ktorych nie ma. Te wiersze czytalem cieplym, zywym
ludziom, pelen wiary w przetrwanie, w koniec, w jutro,
W ZEMSTWE, w radosc i budowanie.
Czytajcie.
To nasza historia.
To czytalem umarłym...21

(Carting of cement, bricks, nights reverberate with the din of hammers and axes. Pumping of water, constructing of underground wells. Bunkers. Mania. Running, the heart of the Warsaw Ghetto palpitates violently.

Light, underground cables, escape routes, again bricks,
ropes, sand... Lots of sand... Sand...
Board-beds, bunk-beds. Provisions for months.
Crossing of electrical wires, faucets, everything.
Twenty centuries crossed out by the whip of an S.S.-man.
Cave Age. Muzzles. Village wells. Long night. People are
returning to the caves.
Before the animals.
And beyond the window, the sun continually rises.
An exceptionally mild February.
I am reviewing and classifying poems I wrote for those
who are no longer here. I read these poems to warm, living
people, full of hope in outlasting, in an end, in tomorrow,
in revenge, in joy and creativity.
Read.
This is our history...
This I had read to the dead...)

More than his other wartime writing, this passage, (like the
rest of "What I Read to the Dead") is poetry of humble fact,
poetry of remembered reality. "Reality as it is remembered,"
Czeslaw Milosz writes, "is the most humble art of mimesis."
For this reality "is paramount and dictates the means of
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expression." Perhaps it occurred to Szlengel, even before it
struck, among others, Czeslaw Milosz, Tadeusz Rozewicz,
Tadeusz Borowski, T. W. Adorno, George Steiner, and Elie
Wiesel (although his own endeavors seem to belie it), that
the idea of literature about the Holocaust is impossible and
indecent. Perhaps, too, Szlengel realized that the ability
of art to transform anguish and moral chaos into carefully
wrought poetic diction would, in the end, pervert their
truth.

Szlengel's style, his "poetry of fact", as Irena
Maciejewska observes, "derives from an awareness that the
business of a writer is to record what was and how it was, a
bequest of the "conventional" fulfillment of an apocalypse

that unfolds without the blast of trumpets...." ("Poezja faktu" wyrosła ze świadomości, że sprawa pisarza jest zapisac to, co było i jak było, jest przekazanie "zwyczajności" spełniającej się apokalipsy, która dokonuje się bez grzmotu ²³ trab). Maciejewska further writes that if read today, Szlengel's work seems an obvious antecedent of the ²⁴ development and general direction of post-war Polish poetry. Thus Szlengel's simple, "reportage-poetry," (donosy poetyckie, as the poet labeled them), born on the far side of evil, are a precursor of the minimalism of Tadeusz Rozewicz and Tadeusz Borowski, as well as of the antipoetry of Miron Białoszewski-- although both the poets and the writer of the tales of Auschwitz probably evolved their poetics independent of Szlengel's legacy. Rozewicz, for example writes in 1966:

Czułem że coś skończyło się na zawsze dla mnie i dla ludzkości.... W tym czasie, a więc w roku 1945, w kilka miesięcy od zakończenia drugiej wojny światowej i okupacji hitlerowskiej, takie określenia, jak "przerzucie estetyczne," "przeżycie artystyczne," wydawały mi się śmieszne i podejrzane. Potem w sierpniu zrzucono pierwszą bombę atomową. Do dnia dzisiejszego tzw. przeżycie estetyczne ciągle wydaje mi się śmieszne, choć już nie godne pogardy. To przekonanie o śmierci dawnego "przeżycia estetycznego" leży ciągle u podstaw mojej praktyki pisarskiej.²⁵

(I felt that both for me and humanity something came to a permanent end.... At this time, in 1945, a few months after the end of World War Two and the German Occupation, such definitions as "aesthetic experience," "artistic experience," seemed to me laughable and suspicious. Later, in September, the atom bomb was dropped. To this day, this so-called aesthetic experience still seems to me laughable, though unworthy even of scorn. This conviction of the death of the former "aesthetic experience," continues to underlie the principles and practice of my writing.)

Such writers as Rozewicz apparently arrived at their epiphany by means of reflection--a cogitation that allows for a temporal and spatial distance between "the man who suffers and the mind that creates." This distinction is regarded as necessary to perfect aesthetic forms, even if Rozewicz scorned aesthetics. Szlengel, on the other hand, not having had the benefit of this distance, arrived at his epiphany more intuitively, pressed by the necessity of a final knowledge.

Since "What I Read to the Dead" was literally written for the dead, there is a constriction of the poet's inherently lyrical voice. Indeed, much as in Julian Przybos's untitled poem, discussed above, there is an obliteration of the very shape and structure associated with poetry. Szlengel's intuition, tempered as it is by the ghetto experience, seeks in verbal and structural asceticism a means of communicating his grief and wrath. But his terse lexicon and episodic structure generate connotations that go beyond these states of feeling. The quoted passage vibrates with the energy of despair. There is nothing melancholy about his grief. In this he reflects the morale of the ghetto, for few people surrendered to total depression. Although the suffering that followed each "Aktion," which like an elemental force swept the ghettos, left indelible memories on that portion of the population who escaped it, incidents of suicide were very rare, and the determination to carry on rarely waned. Some people in the ghettos

interpreted this behavior as a form of emotional atrophy or
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mental occlusion. But the determination to "pick up the
pieces" was in no small measure a form of spiritual
resistance, a tradition encoded in the Jewish collective
unconscious and engendered both by Judaic theodicy and the
regularity of catastrophes visited upon the Jews. For
Judaism teaches and, indeed, orders people not to yield to
despair. There was, for example, in the Warsaw Ghetto a
Hasidic rabbi whose exhortations not to give up were
emblazoned above the entrance of his small shul (shtibl) in
these words: "In God's name, Jews, do not despair." Thus
Jewish history, as already noted, is an endless rehearsal of
the essential exhortations to celebrate life and to proclaim
hope despite the recurrent waves of destruction.

Both the feverish building of bunkers and Szlengel's
literary mimesis reflect aspects of the rabbi's injunction,
for they are articles of hope. But Szlengel, a master
ironist, probably more doubtful than the rabbi in the
possibility of deliverance, seems to imply that the frenetic
activity resembles the ordeal of Sisyphus. The sense of
futility is intimated in the iterated image of bricks,
"Carting of cement, bricks.... / again bricks...." The
accretion of this image suggests not only the feverish
smuggling of bricks in the secrecy of night, but also the
attempts to improve the safety of the bunkers. To that end
the ghetto architects and engineers, some of them home grown,

were urged to add yet another "brick," to devise yet a more ingenious entrance.

Although ultimately proved futile, the inventiveness of the architects was reassuring, for some of the bunkers, notably those built in the cellars, had not only emergency exits ("escape routes"), but also emergency chambers, excavated under the initial level of the bunker. The lower level was accessible through long crawl-in tunnels, the entrance to which was a swiveling toilet bowl--that is, if the entrance to the upper level had a different camouflage. The more elaborate shelters were furnished with "underground wells," as Szlengel breathlessly lists, "underground cables....," "board-beds, bunk-beds. Provisions for months./...electrical wires, faucets, everything." One might also add that some of them included burial places.

Yet despite the faith of the desperate people in these hide-outs, Szlengel, like many other Jews, knew that they were castles of sand. The anaphoric "sand... lots of sand... Sand....," like the iterated image of "bricks" is not only a literal recording of the amounts of sand required for the construction of the bunkers, but also an allusion to the futility of the very attempt. The sense of futility is heightened by the ellipses, an ironic preterition that signals not the idea that "sand... Lots of sand..." is required as dependable building material, but rather the truncation of that idea. Thus the meaning is reflected in the form.

The reciprocal relationship between content and structure is what makes this passage cohere. For the verbal and emotional frenzy that marks it, hampering and at the same time rendering the poet's expressions more rapid, threatens the total destruction of the already disjunctive poetic form. The fierce diction of the one word sentences, their nervous, staccato rhythms, the elliptical phrasing and asyndetic construction, and not least the irony--all of these cause the words to fall unconnected as if out of the poet's control. In fact, the disconnected string of nouns and appositives--e.g., "Bunkers. Mania. Running..." "Light, underground cables, escape routes, again bricks, rope, sand...", and the like--are held together by merely a few abstract and impersonal verbals, "Zwozi sie," "pompuje sie," "robi sie," "Przekresla sie," which, incidentally, do not have a grammatical equivalent in the English language but are translated as the gerunds: "carting of cement," "pumping of water," "constructing of wells," "Crossing of electrical wires". Laying bare the poet's agitation and grief, all of the rhetorical forms, a language of despair, are an echo of the poem's sense.

Szlengel's anguish and rage are as much a function of his personal loss, the disappearance of his family, friends, the Jews, as of the obliteration of twenty centuries of Western Civilization. His is an elegy written "for those who are no longer here... [the] warm, living people, full of hope

in outlasting, in an end, in tomorrow, in revenge, in joy and creativity." But, like Julian Przybos's poem, "What I Read to the Dead" is also a dirge for the destroyed human principles, the "twenty centuries crossed out by the whip of an S.S.-man," the "Cave Age," to which "people are returning."/ "Before the animals," and the "Long night," ushered in by Germany.

The ironic image of the sun rising outside the "Long night" that has swallowed up the Jews, ("And beyond the window, the sun is increasingly higher./ An exceptionally mild February,") is obviously a conventional topos, conveying the incongruity between human suffering and nature's neutral beauty. For Szlengel, however, it is also a verbal bridge that helps his aroused psyche to move from the world of the dead to that of the living. For him, this image connotes less nature's neutrality than the indifference of those beyond the landscape of death. The conclusion of "What I Read to the Dead" is clearly addressed to those who inhabit this side of the Styx. "Read./ This is our history.../ This I read to the dead..." Contained therein is an implied message whose meaning is articulated in more precise terms in a postscript to "What I Read to the Dead." It reads thus: "To byly wiersze, ktore nie dotarły sumien.../ A żywi.../ No, coz.../ ...żywi niech nie traca nadziei..." (These were poems that did not reach the conscience.../ And the living.../ Well, the living.../ the living must not lose heart").

Like Szlengel's, and like most of the poetry in the Holocaust, Sutzkever's poems, including the most lyrical, are rooted in fact, "born of the actual...", as Ruth Wiese writes in "The Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever," "the situation and vocabulary riveting the art to its concrete origin in fact." The very factuality of Sutzkever's poetry rendered it more public and hence more accessible to the sensibilities of the readers in the ghetto. This phenomenon, a "poem of community," as Northrop Frye calls it in his discussion of the "Theory of Genres," made it seem to rise from the collective as well as personal experience of the readers, uniting them in a form of "participation mystique." Such a participation mystique, Frye writes, marks not only sacred and oracular literature, but the panegyric, elegy or threnody as well. Since much of Sutzkever's poetry is marked by oracular and prophetic resonances, they tended to absorb the readers in communal participation, summoning them to spiritual or armed resistance. Even the pure threnodies had an intended didactic bias or were perceived, according to ghetto testimony, to be morally instructive. Such a threnody is "Di Lererin Mihre."

Mit lahtehs oyf layber, tseshnitn in pasn,
 Me traybt undz in ghetto, es geyen di gasn.
 Di hayzer bagleytn oyf eybik gezegnt
 Un shtaynerdik vert yeder gzeyre bagegnt.

In tephillin vi kroynen marshirn di skeynim,
 A kelbeleh geyt mit a dorfsyid in eynem.
 A froy shlept a goyses farklemt in de negl,
 A tsvayter--a binteleh holts oyf a vegl.

Un tsvishn zey aleh--di lererin Mirhe.
A kind oyf ir orem--a gildeneh lirhe.
A kind oyf ir orem, baym hentl a tsveytn,
Arum di talmidim, bagleytn, bagleytn.

Un kumt men tsu Yiddisher gas, iz a toyer,
Nokh varhem dos holts vi a kerper a royer.
Un glaykh vi a shloyz far getribenhe shtromen,
Er tut zikh an efn, farshlingt in di thomen.

Me yogt ihber hurves ohn broyt ohn fayer,
Dos broyt iz a bukh un dos likht iz a blayer.
Farzaml't di kinder in hurver dirhe,
Es lernt zey vayter di lererin Mirhe.

Zi leyent zey Sholem Aleykhem's a mayseh,
Es finklen di kinder un lakhn bes-mayse.
Zi flekht zey mit bloyeneh stenghen di tseplekh
Un tseylt ir farmegn: hundert draysik di keplekh.

Tsu glaykh mit der zun iz di larerin Mirhe
shoy'n vakh un zi vart oyf di kinderlekh ihre.
Zey kumen. Zi tseylt. O, nit tseyln zey besser!--
Durkh nakht hot doh tswantsik farshnitn a messer.

Ir hoyt vert a shoyb in farnakhtikeh flekn,
Nor s'tor zey nit Mirhe di kinder antplekn.
Farbayst zi a lip un mit gvurah banayter
Dertseylt zi fun Lekertn, muntert zey vayter.

Durkh nakht hot a grohkayt batsoygn di heyfn,
Un groh vert di lererins hor oyf di shleyfn:
Zi zukht ihnem keller ir mahmen der blinder--
Tsuzamen mit ir feln zibetsn kinder.

Ven zun hot di blutn getriknt, hot Mirhe
Bahangen mit grins di faryosemte' dirhe:
--Gekumen der lerer Gershtein, me vet zingen
Der khor zol arhiber di toyern klingen.

Shoy'n klingt es: "nit vayt iz der frihling." Nor untn
Di hek un bagnetn tsetreyslen di gruntn.
Me shlept far di hor fun di kellers un lekher.
"Nit vayt iz der frihling" farklingt ober hekher.

Shoy'n zekhtsik farblibn ohn shvester, ohn mahmes
Di lererin Mirhe iz alle tsuzamen.
S'iz nohent a yom-tov, iz, taybelekh, kinder,
A forshtelung darf men bavayzn geshwinder!

Tsum yom-tov--nitoh mer vi fertsik--nor itlekh--
Mit vaysikn hemdl, mit likhtikeh tritlekh.

Di binhe iz frish mit a zun, mit a gortn,
me ken azsh in taykhl zikh oysbodn.

Baym leyenen Peretses Drihte Matonah
Hot untergezegt dos geboy di sakoneh.
Zey hobn gekhapt! Un fartog iz geblibn
Fun hundert mit draysik, bloyz Mirhe un zibn.

Azoy, biz di hak hot tseshpoltn dem zihnen,
iz Mihre a blum un di kinderlekh--bihnen.
Shoy n groh iz di blum farvelkt ihre glihder
Nor morgn in toy vet zi oyfblien vidher.29

(With patches on our flesh, cut into stripes,/ We are driven
into the ghetto, the streets run ahead./ The buildings
escort us forever left behind/ And each draconic decree is
met like a stone.

In phylacteries like crowns march old men,/ A little calf and
a country-Jew walk side-by-side./ A woman drags someone
dying clasped between her nails,/ Another one -- a bundle of
wood in a wagon.

And among them all--the Teacher Mirhe./ A child in her arms--
a golden lyre. A child in her arms, a second one--hand-in-
hand,/ And around them the pupils, an escorting band.

And when Yiddish Street is reached, there is a gate,/ The
wood still warm like raw flesh./ And just like a sluice
before rushing streams,/ It breaks open, swallowing all in
its abyss.

Driven through ruins without fire without bread,/ Bread is a
book and light a pencil's lead./ The children collected in a
tenement's ruins, the Teacher Mirhe resumes her teaching.

She reads to them a tale by Sholom-Aleychem,/ The children
all sparkle and laugh at the story,/ She plaits into braids
blue ribbons/ and takes count of her treasure: a hundred
thirty little heads.

Like the very sun is the Teacher Mirhe/ Already awake she
awaits her small fry./ They are coming. She counts. O, much
better not to count!--/ During the night twenty were cut
down by a knife.

Her skin turns to glass in the stain of dusk,/ But Mirhe
must not reveal it to the them./ So she bites her lip and
with fortitude renewed/ She tells them about Lekert, and
cheers them up anew.

During the night grayness has covered the court-yards,/ And
gray has turned the teacher's hair around the temples:/ She

searches for her blind mother down in the cellar--/ Together
with her seventeen children have vanished.

When the sun had dried the blood,/ Mirhe began decorating the
orphaned tenement with greens:/ --In came Teacher Gerstein,
there will be song./ The chorus above the gates must resound.

It's resounding: "Not Far is Spring." But below/ the axes
and bayonets shatter the walls./ And people are dragged by
the hair from cellars and holes./ But "Not Far is Spring"
resounds ever lauder.

Only sixty are left without siblings, without mothers,/ The
Teacher Mihre embodies them all./ Children, soon there's a
holiday, there is, little sparrows,/ We must quickly work on
a show!

At the dawn of the holiday--there are no more than forty.
But each one--/ In the whitest of shirts, with luminous
childish steps./ The stage is aglow with a sun, and a
garden,/ One can actually bathe there.

During the reading of Perets's "The Third Gift,"/ The
building was sawed down by the fiend./ They caught them!
And at dawn all that was left,/ From the hundred and thirty,
were Mirhe and seven.

And so, till the axe had cleaved the mind,/ Mirhe turned
flower and the little kids--bees./ And grayed has the
flower, wilted her core/ But tomorrow in the dew she will
blossom once more.)

Unlike Szlengel who rarely dates his poems, yet
invariably locates them in concrete fact that is deliberately
projected as timeless and undifferentiated hell, Sutzkever
locates his poem in a specific time frame and thus also welds
it to its concrete origin in fact. "The teacher Mirhe,"
dated 10 May, 1943, shortly before the total elimination of
the Vilna Ghetto in September of that year, is a factual
account of the begining and near end of that place. In this
it resembles Szlengel's poem "Things," discussed in the
preceding chapter. Like "Things"--a contraction of the
history of the Warsaw Ghetto--"The Teacher Mirhe" is a

compressed history of the Vilna Ghetto. But whereas the central image of Szlengel's poem is the descent of human possessions into the narrowing funnel of the ghetto, the focus of Sutzkever's poem is people, notably, a woman whose boundless love and courage not only kept her pupils alive as long as possible, but also inspired moral fortitude in most people who knew her. Moreover, while "Things" resonates with fury, irony, and the grotesque, all stoked by the poet's anguish, the voice of "The Teacher Mirhe" is marked by muted grief, bounded by the Apollonian patterns of the poem. Although the structure of each work is vastly different, they are both narrative poems. What further distinguishes the two poems is the balladic feeling of "The Teacher Mirhe."

Although clearly not a pure ballad, this poem shares certain conventions with the literary ballad. Like the latter, it is a song poem that tells a story and that, in sophistication in handling of established balladic techniques, rhetorical devices, and themes of a reflective nature, towers over its earlier prototypes. Yet it retains the eerie and the sinister. But these, significantly, derive not from deliberate poetic inventions, but, as already discussed, from the surreality of the events. "The Teacher Mirhe" is further marked by directness of narrative and exposition, allowing for an unhindered development of the story line, all of which are associated with the ballad. In these features it resembles that class of Sutzkever's poems

to which "A Cartload of Shoes" belongs, although the latter is a more self-conscious ballad (see Chapter One). The meter of both poems is distinguished by its simplicity. The stanza form of "The Teacher Mirhe" is a quatrain, mostly of four stress lines with an impeccable abab rhyme scheme.

The expository opening scenes of the poem unveil the turbulent events that drive Mirhe and her charges into oblivion. Since these events are by their very nature the poet's demonic epiphany, he uses surreal images to convey it. The surreal is, at rock bottom, a mechanism of translation or preservation of essentially unutterable truths.

In the first stanza, images of dehumanization, pauperization, and perplexity establish the violence with which the Jews were herded into the ghetto on September 6, 1941. Driven from their homes and robbed of their possessions, they were further humiliated by two yellow patches with an inscribed letter "J" in the center of each. The ambiguous image "With patches on our flesh, cut into stripes" alludes either to the yellow patch decree or to the poverty to which the Jews had already been reduced. The syntactical strategy of this line produces a form of metonymy and is, therefore, an intimation of both. Moreover, the image of "patches on our flesh, cut into stripes," rather than on clothes, conjures up a picture of stigmata burned or cut into the flesh, or else of suddenly appearing protrusions. "The large piece of yellow material on... [the] shoulders seemed to be burning me.... I felt a hump, as though I had two

frogs on me," reads "The 8th of July, 1941" diary entry of the fourteen year old Yitskhak Rudashevski. But Sutzkever's verbal strategy evokes with equal power that kind of unique wretchedness that is associated with people in patches and rags on a death march. This sense is further augmented by an intimation of stoning, "and each draconic decree is met like a stone." These emblems of violence and damnation are amplified by the surreal tableau of "streets [that] run ahead" or "buildings [that] escort us forever left behind." Each of these images suggests the shock sustained by the human mind--a state of frozen suspension--produced by that violence. Thus the condemned appear to be riveted in place, while the streets and buildings seem to do the running and the escorting; it is much like the impression one gets in a madly speeding vehicle.

Like a roving camera or the retina of a painter, Sutzkever's poetic eye fastens here on one, there on another subject in this eerie procession. Singled out in this motley humanity are pious old men, who, both defying the peril and invoking divine tempering mercy, wear "phylacteries like crowns." These cameos of majesty and faith are etched with veneration and anguish. And so is the portrayal of a simple country Jew and a little calf, presumably the man's only possession, who walk side-by-side. Following this, is a more sinister scene of a dying person, pulled along by a woman whose despair is registered in the image of clutching nails.

The use of the Hebrew term goyses for the dying person lends further weight to the woman's grief. This is juxtaposed by an image of another woman dragging a bundle of wood in a wagon, an incongruity with which the poet probably alludes to the breakdown of basic human values among the Jews themselves.

The last image is, however, redeemed by the pictorial power of the Teacher Mirhe, executed in the manner of an allegorical emblem. Carrying "a child in her arms--a golden lyre," clutching another one's hand, and encircled by a retinue of orphans, the image of this woman parallels that of the old men in "phylacteries like crowns." She is like an anima figure whose very presence seems numinous, transcending the wretchedness of the doomed people. But like the rest of the nightmarish procession, "a rushing stream"--with the implied thousands of men, women, and children, some shuffling along apathetically, many shoving and pushing, but virtually all dazed, clutching each other for comfort, while harnessed to large bundles, many of which are abandoned by falling people who are driven on by the Lithuanians--Mirhe and her pupils are swallowed by the ghetto gate. The confusion and helplessness of the unsuspecting, unprepared and unarmed procession is embodied in the image of a "rushing stream" that breaks the "sluice" and is swallowed into an "abyss." The impression of brutality with which they are exiled into oblivion is further heightened by the evocative

image of the gate, the "wood" of which "is still warm like raw flesh."

With a subtle shift of technique, notably in tone and collocation of imagery, the fifth strophe shows the established ghetto, through the ruins of which Mirhe and her small charges are endlessly driven. Since hardly any residence in the ghetto was permanent, the teacher and the orphans were forced to settle in one or another tenement ruin, in each room of which it was not unusual to find fifteen people, as young Rudashevski testifies.³¹ Although the ruins are factual, they are also used to signify the destruction that was wrought by the systematic deportations to such death pits as Ponary. But during the interludes, the darkness of the ruins and the children's world were illuminated by the love of Teacher Mirhe, and hunger was assuaged by study.

While the opening four strophes are marked by a tension arising from a deliberate restraint of tone--an attempt to maintain a measure of distance--the tone of the following stanzas is increasingly reverential and grief stricken. The poet's voice begins to reach a pitch of high intensity when he invokes the "hundred-thirty" sparkling faces of the hungry children and their laughter in response to a story by Sholom Aleychem. The reader's perception of the poet's intensity derives mostly from a double system of references, one that imposes a form of collusion between the poet and reader, both of whom know the fate of Mirhe and her pupils. The angst that

this tragic irony generates is most eloquently conveyed in the image of the teacher counting the numbers of her "treasure," prefiguring the lament in the following strophe, "O, much better not to count!--/ During the night twenty were cut down by a knife." Sutzkever, whose child was poisoned by the Germans, seems to identify his child with Mihre's orphans, an identification that is audible in the tone and lexicon with which he refers to them. In speaking about them, it is as if he were speaking to them, caressing and loving them, trying to shield them from pain and lurking death. His lament is, therefore, expressed in words used when addressing children: "In came Teacher Gerstein, there will be song/ The chorus above the gates must resound./ It's resounding: 'Not Far is Spring.'" Several stanzas later, in a reference to the stage setting prepared for the holidays, when only forty children are left, there appear these evocative lines, again as if spoken to the children: "The stage is aglow with a sun, and a garden,/ one can actually bathe there."

Although heart breaking, some of the iconography of suffering that follows is somewhat sentimental, a characteristic that occasionally creeps into Sutzkever's work. The most salient example of this is the lachrymose image of Mirhe searching for her blind mother in a cellar (9th strophe). Nonetheless, it must be noted that Mirhe is neither a poetic invention nor a disembodied legend, but

rather a real woman of flesh and blood, a teacher whose love for and devotion to the orphans was indeed legendary. Moreover, the somewhat stock-figure of her mother is alleged to be real as well. And real also, according to allegations, is the fact that the blind woman tried in vain to escape deportation by hiding out in a cellar. Nonetheless, "in poetry a credible impossibility is to be chosen before an incredible [or poetically awkward, one might add] possibility."

The dignity of the preceding image, however, tends to neutralize the last one, throwing both into sharp relief. In alluding to the grief that the teacher and, in fact, all the adults suffered when they helplessly watched the terror or murder of children, the poet transforms ordinary words into anigmatic constellations. Thus Mirhe's skin becomes a "window pane in the stain of dusk," a transmutation that is produced by her realization that "during the night twenty [children] were cut down by a knife." The shock of this image conveys nuances of suffering so unspeakable that only its surreality can attempt to express the teacher's anguish. Although this conceit may sound awkward in English, the original Yiddish is of singular power, suggesting pain so ineffable that it cannot be contained within consciousness alone, but has an impact on the viscera as well. Using a form of the grotesque, Sutzkever implies that the shock of the impact is so violent that it causes Mirhe's skin to become transluscent, revealing the battered inner organs.

Hence the stains of dusk on the window pane. In this organic unity, the grotesque has a metaphysical connotation, for the unity is only apparent and derives from things other than themselves. In the same way, when the poet uses the word "knife" as a metaphor for the demise of the children in the pits of Ponary or gas chambers elsewhere, the thing in itself, the knife, is clearly something other than its thingness.

Sutzkever's avoidance of naming the actual instrument of death or the enemy derives from a sustained determination, as mentioned in the preceding chapter, not to defile the sacrosanct memory of the murdered Jews. Ruth R. Wisse interprets this phenomenon as "special acts of aggression, annihilating the foe by denying him existence. The Germans are subjected to almost total linguistic extinction: they appear, when at all, stripped of human form and abstracted into instruments of death--the noose, the knife, the boot, the time of slaughter. Just as the "I" of the poem emphasizes his own triumphant presence, so he eliminates the actual enemy by sustained neglect." ³² Moreover, the abstraction of the instruments of death is intended both to translate the unspeakable into the logos of speech and to raise it to a transcendental level. This vehicle makes the tragedy, if not more bearable, then at least more utterable.

Since the poetic universe of "The Teacher Mirhe" is organic, the images of murder are interconnected, revealing

in the middle as in the conclusion of the poem similar abstractions of the instruments of death. Thus in the closing strophe, the precise weapon with which Mirhe, the children, and all the other Jews were killed is not mentioned--possibly, too, because a deliberate darkness shrouded the death of those who were deported or who disappeared into some other void. Instead, an "axe that cleaved the mind" is the symbol of annihilation. This image suggests and, at once, eschews the unutterable, while it evokes a sense of holy darkness that is richly orchestrated in the closing images. "Mirhe is a flower and the little children--bees./ And grayed has the flower, wilted her core/ But tomorrow in the dew she will blossom once more."

Sutzkever's evasion of the thing-in-itself, the death of Mirhe and her hundred-thirty charges, is revealed once more in surreal images. The surreal derives from the poet's use of a flower and identifying its place in nature with the unexpected. The flower into which Mirhe has been transmuted after her death has turned "gray," a hue generally not associated with wilted flowers. Such symbolic associations take their energy from a perception of singularity in connection with the object with which they are equated. Although intended as a reflection of the people and their morale, the teacher and children are presented in their uniqueness and, therefore, singled out for apotheosis. This is articulated in the inherent transcendentality of a flower that has "grayed" yet has not died, for "tomorrow in the dew

she will blossom once more." Mirhe and the children, who have been transformed into bees, are, therefore, immortal; however not only because they have fulfilled their tragic mission in death, but also, and perhaps more importantly, because their mission presupposes the pollenization of posterity, as the imagery of a flower and bees implies.

Since Mirhe and her children are representative of the Jews in the ghetto, all the victims are apotheosized. For as the poet also suggests in the image of the undaunted old Jews, "In phyllactries like crowns," they fought back with everything they had. Most of the time, the most available and hence most effective weapon was their spiritual resilience--an ancient paradigm in which the Jews are well practiced. It is this that kept their souls from dying. The network of images of love so desperately unwavering and study and creativity so persistently growing in the ruins of the people's lives and buildings are structured to convey the value of that archetypal ethos. In the absence of any other more viable means (an issue that is more comprehensively discussed in the following chapter), the alternative was despair, the stunned surrender of those who could no longer endure.

Although not all of the death or other imagery in this poem is transcendental, every allusion to the protagonists is reverential and encomiastic. For Mirhe and the children personify moral fortitude without the example of which no

survival would have been possible, even if they themselves were in the end killed. Such a reading of the poem arises from the ambivalence inherent in the closing images which suggest not only the spiritual pollenization of distant posterity, but of the immediate environment as well. In this elegaic record of the beginning and end of the Vilna Ghetto, Sutzkever's desire is not only to inform, but also to instruct. This ideological bias, coupled as it is with a creative mind, generates specific selections of characters and events. By means of these the poet eulogizes, while he conveys both an immediacy of perception and a determination to guide. The specific historical selections, the logic that governs them, and the mode of representation are all designed to throw light on the courage of individual acts of moral resistance. At the same time, as an interpretive mediator, the poet provides a model to be emulated by other people in the ghetto.

Thus, the poet singles out those patterns that are most common, those that create an atmosphere in which the children find a bulwark against despair. These include the readings of the comi-tragic but inspiring tales of Sholom Aleychem, the more sophisticated works of Perets, another masterful Yiddish writer, or the heroic story of Lekert, a Jew who in 1926 assassinated the notorious anti-Semite and Ukrainian national hero, Semyon Petlura. This story probably was of special significance to the children. The Ukrainians were one of the most brutal instruments used by the Germans in the

"final solution." Propelled by their traditional superstitious anti-Semitism that was further exacerbated by a compulsion to avenge Petlura, the Ukrainians staged bloody pogroms, slaughtering and delivering thousands of Jews to the Germans. The children were of course aware of the role that the Ukrainians played in the fate of the Jews. Consequently, they probably derived a vicarious sense of victory in the story of Lekert.

These and other examples--notably the songs of hope and defiance or the teacher's theatrical entrepreneurship--demonstrate the ways in which Mihre was able to harness the ebbing energies both of her children and her own. But the external events are like a nightmare that close in on the controlling intelligence of the poet who selects them, since for him personally, they are "the axe [that] had cleaved the mind," the beckoning of insanity. Because of its syntactical position, this appositive is both an allusion to the murder of Mirhe and the children, and to the poet's state of mind. His anguish and the battle with madness seem controlled only by the artifact of the poem. In the end, this poem, like all the poems in the Holocaust, is nothing more than a verbal barricade against moral disintegration, and perhaps, too, a silent scream that demands to be heard.

NOTES

1 Henryk Grynberg, "The Holocaust in Polish Literature," Notre Dame English Journal, vol. 11, no. 2 (April 1979), p. 115.

2 Michal Borwicz, "Introduction," in Piesn ujdzie calo: Antologia wierszy o Zydach pod okupacja niemiecka (The Song Shall Pass Unscathed: An Anthology of Poetry About Jews Under the German Occupation), ed. Michal Borwicz (Warsaw: Centralna zydowska komisja historyczna w Polsce, 1947), p. 31. Translations of quoted passages and poems from this anthology are this writer's.

3 Chaim Kaplan, The Warsaw Diary, trans. and ed. Abraham Katsh (New York: Colliers, 1976), p. 79.

4 Czeslaw Milosz, The History of Polish Literature (London: Collier Macmillan LTD., 1969), p. 402.

5 Ibid.

6 Julian Przybos, "Jestem pracownikiem slowa" (I am a Craftsman of Words), Piesn ujdzie calo (The Song Shall Pass Unscathed), pp. 34-5.

7 Milosz, p. 403.

8 Abraham Sutzkever, "Gezang fun Yiddishn Dikhter in 1943" (Chant of a Jewish Poet in 1943), Lider fun Yam Hamoves (Songs From the Dead Sea) (Tel Aviv: World Federation of Bergen Belsen Associations, 1968), p. 79. All poems from this anthology are translated by this writer. Further references to Sutzkever's poems are in this anthology.

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(New York: Schocken Books, 1948), p. 55.
- 10
Michal Borwicz, "Introduction," Piesn ujdzie calo,
pp. 25-6.
- 11
Wladyslaw Szlengel, "Juz czas" (It's Hight Time),
Co czytalem umarlym (What I Read to the Dead), edit. and
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wydawniczy, 1977), pp. 129-30. Translations of quoted poems
from this anthology are this writer's. Further references
to Szlengel's poetry are in this anthology.
- 12
Byron Sherwin, "Wiesel's Midrash," Confronting the
Holocaust: The Impact of Elie Wiesel, ed. Alvin Rosenfeld
and Irving Greenberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
1978), p. 125.
- 13
Yitzhak Katzenelson, The Song of the Murdered Jewish
People, trans. Noah H. Rosenbloom (Israel: Ghetto Fighters'
House, 1980), pp. 54-5.
- 14
Ibid. p. 68.
- 15
Zivia Lubetkin, In the Days of Destruction and
Revolt, trans. Ishai Tubbin (Israel: Ghetto Fighters' House,
1981), p. 62.
- 16
Borwicz, "Introduction," Piesn ujdzie calo, p. 14.
- 17
I learned this song in the Warsaw Ghetto.
- 18
Lucy Dawidowicz, The War Against the Jews (New York:
Bentam Books, 1975), p. 291.
- 19
Ibid.
- 20
Both my sister and I briefly studied French with a
young teacher who found her way into our bunker. The bunker,
built by my father, was intended for twelve people, but
actually sheltered about fifty, including a brigade of ghetto

fighters.

21 Szlengel, "Co czytalem umarlym" (What I Read to the Dead), pp. 49-50.

22 Czeslaw Milosz, The Witness of Poetry (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. 85.

23 Irena Maciejewska, "Introduction," Co czytalem umarlym, p. 27.

24 Ibid. pp. 25-6.

25 Quoted by Maciejewska, Ibid. p. 26.

26 Lucjan Dobroszycki, "The Untold Story of the Lodz Ghetto," The New York Times Magazine, New York: July 29, 1984.

27 Szlengel, "Poslowie" (Postscript), pp. 51-2.

28 Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 294-96.

29 Abraham Sutzkever, "Di Lererin Mihre" (The Teacher Mirhe), pp. 68-70.

30 Yitskhok Rudashewski, The Diary of the Vilna Ghetto, trans. Percy Matenko (Israel: Ghetto Fighters' House, 1973), pp. 29-30.

31 Ibid. p. 33.

32 Ruth Wisse, "The Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever," The Jewish Book Annual (New York: Jewish Book Council, 1979), pp. 31-2.

CHAPTER THREE: POLITICS OF RESISTANCE

The Jews of pre-war Poland had little economic power and nominal access to Poland's political infrastructure. Indeed, they were even barred from the civil service. Hence, as Lucy Dawidowicz writes, "Jewish politics were both symbolic and visionary with morality and messianism substituting for political and economic power." Nonetheless, in the near¹ millennium of their presence in Poland, the Jews developed a complex para-political structure and created a rich culture and literature. Both the political ferment and the cultural-literary imagination were shaped by religious fundamentalism and Humanist Enlightenment. This produced an ideology whose purpose it was to support all aspects of Jewish tradition and to seek equity and sanction for Jews as citizens in a hostile, sometimes murderous world.

The measure of legitimacy that the Jews were able to carve out for themselves, was obliterated by the Nazi occupation of Poland. All political parties as well as cultural and religious life were outlawed. Nonetheless, those organizations that managed to go underground defiantly continued, maintaining an intricate political network. Often the poets, whose voices resonated with cadences of timeless

seers and prophets, were the spiritual backbone of the cells of these organization. Emanuel Ringelblum, the noted historian and chronicler of the Warsaw Ghetto (just as Zivia Lubetkin, one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, mentioned in the preceding chapters) extolls the poets for providing sorely needed guidance, council, and leadership² with regard to both spiritual and armed resistance. Thus the poets are praised not only for the cathartic value of their writing, but for its evocative political power as well. The latter was especially significant, for it often infused the people with a spirit of rebellion and played a significant role in motivating the disenfranchised to join the organized political units in those revolts that occurred during the Holocaust.

As a defense against helplessness, political poetry was largely hortatory, calling for rebellion and revenge. In this it differed from that literary tradition which lamented the pogroms and which reflected the pragmatism of accommodation and appeasement in a world in which Jews had little recourse to civil rights and law in general. Whereas in the past, a policy of appeasement was associated with survival of the religion and the community, in the present crisis many people realized its bankruptcy. Hence the other distinctive characteristics of political poetry in the Holocaust are their ideological repudiation of acquiescence as a vehicle of survival and their intense national spirit. These phenomena mark both Yiddish and

Polish-Jewish poetry, as well as the work of those poets who before the war were either influenced by religious lore or who moved between religion and secularism coupled, as it frequently was, with cosmopolitanism and radicalism.

Like all poetry in the Holocaust, political poetry reflects the changing perceptions of the poets whose sensibilities were besieged by the events. Since each ghetto and, above all, each concentration camp was a separate organism with little or no contact with other places, different hierarchies of human relations prevailed. Even political responses to the unfolding events were subject to such variables as topography, geography, and, most of all, to the attitude of the non-Jewish population in the surrounding areas. The Jews of Vilna, for example, found it easier either to form their own or to join other partisan units in the nearby forests than did the Jews of Warsaw. The reasons include the closer proximity of Vilna to the dense forests and the willingness of the Russians to support or accept Jews into the Russian sponsored resistance brigades. The partisans in the forests near Warsaw were largely members of the Polish Armja Krajowa (A.K.) (Home Army). Because of their unmitigated anti-Semitism, more often than not, they murdered those Jews who managed to get to the forests and who wanted to participate in resistance activities. Perhaps these are some of the reasons for the larger number of resistance poems written in the Vilna Ghetto and the

surrounding forests than in other parts of Poland. On the other hand, this greater productivity may be more apparent than real and ultimately due to the accident that more work from Vilna has survived.

An example of early political poetry is Abraham Sutzkever's "A Shtim fun Harts" (The Heart's Voice). Written in Vilna a few weeks before the ghetto was established on September 6, 1941, this poem is a fierce exhortation to armed resistance both as an act of honor and as a vehicle of survival, views that were to undergo progressive transmutations. Although Sutzkever never abandoned his vision of Jewish revolt, his motives for it were protean and reflected the rapidly changing reality.

A shtim fun harts bahfelt mir: gloyb
In shoyrn farshvekhtn vort gerekhtshaft.
Der vayter yoyrish fun a leyb
Muz vidershpenikn zayn knekhtshaft.

S'iz doh a gang. Es ligt zayn tsil
In vildn urvald fun zikorn.
S'iz oykh faran azah baktsil,
Vos trogt dem sam fun toyznt yorn.

Un zukhstu far dayn payn a zin--
Farvandl zikh in ihr antplecker,
Un her vi zeydes veckn zin
Vi shturhemheck in bronz fun glecker.

S'iz doh a gang, iz kleter, shprayz
Koyf oys dem doynoshtikn shtraykhl.
Der toyt iz moykhl yeder grayz,
Nor zayn a knekht iz er nisht moykhl.³

(The heart's voice commands: believe/ in the already
desecrated word of justice./ The lion's distant heir/ must
rebel against slavery.

There is a course. Its destination/ Is the wild, primeval
forest of memory./ There is also a bacillus/ That carries
its poison for a thousand years.

And if you seek a reason for your anguish--/ Transform
yourself into its revelation,/ And hear how grandfathers
waken sons/ Like stormthrusts cleaving bells of bronze.

There is a course. Ascend, then, stride,/ Free yourself of
the long lasting stigma./ Death forgives every error,/ Only
slavishness it forgives not.)

The restrained external organization of the poem--
disposed as it is in four four-line strophes, each marked by
an iambic meter and an ABAB rhyme scheme--stands in sharp
relief against the fiery inner content. Rooted in
liturgical, anagogically allusive language, this rallying
call to armed resistance invokes the biblical past as a
mnemonic both of Jewish courage and faith in order and
justice. It is, moreover, an adumbration of the admonitory
voice of God that is transmitted not through revelation, but
rather, in keeping with Sutzkever's fundamental secularism,
through the collective heart of Jewish consciousness--one
that reverberates in the heart of the poet.

The telescopic contraction of polar events--one marking
the birth of Judaic Civilization, the other its imminent
destruction--heightens the resonance of the voice's summons
to retrieve from the "primeval forest of memory" the courage
that the twentieth century counterparts of the biblical Jews
desperately need. To amplify the hortatory voice of the
heart, the poet invokes the name of Judah. When Judah was
anointed lion by his father Jacob, the latter prophesied:
"Thine hand shall be on the neck of thine enemies" (Genesis
49: 8). Although "distant," the "heirs of the lion,"

Sutzkever implies, are bound by the same archetypal prophecy and, hence, obligation.

The note of hope in ultimate redemption that is expressed in the trope, "believe/ in the already desecrated word... of justice," is ubiquitous in the poetry of this as well as that of other poets in the Holocaust. The uniqueness of Sutzkever's injunction to believe in justice lies in the implied link between justice and armed revolt against present "slavery" rather than justice that comes as a result of suffering and martyrdom. Jewish orthodoxy makes emphatic the latter: the primacy of Kiddush Hashem (martyrdom in the name of God) mostly through acts associated with fearless pacifism. Sutzkever rejects this imperative, directing his fiercest anger "against the sin of patiently dying..." as Ruth Wisse writes. Wisse further notes that Sutzkever "struggles against his own despair, but against the faint spirit of the Jews he lashes out in militant verse of almost prophetic resonance." Consequently in "The Heart's Voice," he urges his people to purge themselves of the conciliatory ethos that especially dominated the diaspora, "a bacillus that carries its poison for a thousand years." It is this ethos, Sutzkever suggests, that is causally linked to the cyclical reenactment of the tragic Jewish history. To extricate themselves from this fate, the Jews must recognize their own complicity in it, as the line "And if you seek a reason for your anguish, transform yourself into its revelation," suggests.

The closing verses of the poem, "Death forgives every error/ Only slavishness it forgives not," while obviously an admonition, are paradoxically also a subtle recantation of this solemn reproach. For these words are ambivalent, signaling not only the public, censorious, and warning voice of the poet, but his private and intuitive self as well. And it is this lyric self that yearns to forgive what it knows to be easily forgivable. This self is deeply and lovingly rooted in the peaceful theodicy and ethos of its people. It also knows with a profound sensibility of feelings and experience that in a world of endless persecutions, the "error" of acquiescence has often been an example of pragmatism--one that required moral courage and that was, in the final analysis, a vehicle of Jewish continuity. Hence, Sutzkever's bitter diatribe against his people seems to spring less from his perception of Jewish faint-heartedness than from his own sense of despair.

But Sutzkever's despair is always laced with hope. It is this that prompts him to adjure his people to regain the martial grandeur of their biblical ancestors and to repudiate the hallowed pacifism of the last thousand years. Although desacrilized by history, it is the very voice of God--the God of an "eye-for-an-eye"--that resonates in the collective heart of the poet, demanding that his chosen people return to the authority of heroic biblical paradigms. Thus Sutzkever seems to believe that armed resistance in the ghettos would

not only redeem the honor of the Jews, but would also save Jewish lives--a notion he was forced to cast away very soon.

Sutzkever's ambivalence, his deep love and compassion for and his passionate anger at his people, is further orchestrated in a later poem, "Tsum Yortog fun Ghetto Teater" (To the Anniversary of the Ghetto Theatre), dated December 31, 1942.

A.

Mir hobn aleyh zikh farmoyert
Un lebn bezunder.
Nit shmeykhlt tsu unds arayn fun der fray, nit bedoyert--
Far unds ken afiluh der toyt zikh tsebliyen in vunder.

Vi kenen mir zayn den tsuzamen
in derselber misibiyeh?
Di sinha tsu unds vet vi mayz aykh farsahmen--
Undser vundn vet heyln di libhe.

Un biz venen der droysn iz ayer,
Iz undser di ghetto, do veln mir lign
Un knetn fun getlikhn harts a bafrayer
Un shleyfn a nigun...

B.

Shpilt aktyorn Yiddishe balatehtet un farmoyert,
Ven dos lebn kortshet zikh vi ongekhapte hor,
Ven oyf shtayner zidn royte tropns fun di nontste,
Un di gesslekh varfn zikh vi oyfhus nit-derkoylehte,
Un kenen zikh nit oyfhoybn, avekflien, antrinnen...
Shpilt khaveyrim! Zol zikh dakhtn: an amolik shtetl
Un me prahvet khassunah oyf herbstkn bes-aylemin
Mit gezang volekhn un tantsndike likht,
Frylekh in a karahod arum der khosn-kahleh!
Shpilt! Un zol aroysklinghen fun ayer moyl dos Yiddish,
Rayn un lyoter vi der gayst fun a geshokhtn kind,
Harb un hilkhik vi dos kol fun undzer biks pulver,
Vos vet morgn-ibhermorgn
Shpiln fun di dekher...

Un ir, fargapte, umhetike fiddlers,
Vos bay nakht
Flegt ir zikh aroysganvenhen in loyerdikn droysn,

arumgeyn di patroln,
 Un oysgrobn fun dr'erd ayere fiddlen
 Ayngeflantste erhev ayer opmarsh do aher--
 Shpilt ir oykh!
 Un knaypt oroys di sahme tifste tenher!
 Zoln zey zikh trogn ibher ayere gebaynen
 Un farvoglen vayt avhu es finklt nokh a Yid...
 Vu a harts nokh tsaplt in dervartung oyf a psurha.
 Zoln zey zikh trogn ibher felder, ibher frontn,
 Rayn un hilkhik vi dos kol fun a gashokhtn kind.
 Harb un hilkhik vi dos kol fun undser biks un pulver,
 Vos vet morgn-ibhermorgn shpiln fun di dekher...5

A.

(We alone have immured ourselves/ And live in isolation./
 Nothing of the free world smiles upon us/ nothing
 commiserates--/ In face of us, even death can flower in
 wonder.

How then can we be united/ in the self-same community?/
 Hatred toward us will poison you like mice--/ Our wounds love
 alone will heal.

And as long as the outside is yours,/ ours is the ghetto,
 here shall we lie/ And from the divine heart knead a
 redeemer/ And polish a tune...

B.

Play, Jewish actors ragged and walled-in,/ When life shrinks
 like hair on fire,/ When red drops of the closest kin sizzle
 on the stones,/ When the streets thrash like not quite
 slaughtered poultry,/ That can neither raise themselves, fly
 away nor disappear.../ Play friends! Let's pretend: an old
 shtetl and wedding festivities on the autumnal cemetery/ with
 song and lively dance and dancing lights,/ A merry circle
 around the bride and groom!/ Play! And from your lips let the
 Yiddish ring,/ Clear and resonant like the spirit of a
 slaughtered child,/ Resounding and strong like the charge of
 our gun and powder,/ Which will tomorrow, the day after
 tomorrow/ play from the rooftops...

And you, you bewildered and spiritless fiddlers,/ who used to
 sneak out at night/ into the lurking outdoors,/ creeping
 against the walls,/ crawling to the ruins of your old homes/
 To dig up from the earth your fiddles/ you planted before you
 were made to come here--/ You too play!/ And pinch out the
 most profound tunes!/ Let them be carried over your remains/
 And roam far, where a Jew still twinkles.../ Where a heart
 still flutters in anticipation of a message./ Let them be
 carried over fields, over frontlines./ Clear and resonant like

the spirit of a slaughtered child,/ Resounding and strong
like the charge from our gun and powder,/ That will tomorrow,
the day after tomorrow/ Play from the rooftops...)

This poem distills with utmost precision the alternations in Sutzkever's perceptions of the present tyranny and the bewildering changes that it ushered in. "We alone have immured ourselves/ And live in isolation" is an echo of the scolding accusations in "The Heart's Voice." But in "To the Anniversary...", the poet's recantation of his invectives is achieved with great alacrity and directness. Whereas in the former poem, it is the intuitive rather than the rational self of the poet that rushes to the rescue of the people it accuses and maligns, in the latter poem, it is the integrated consciousness that seems surprised by its diatribe. Thus the poet asks in pensive tones: "How can we be united in the selfsame community?" This question produces a sudden epiphany--namely, that the wretched ground of history has forever buried the hope of human fraternity and with it the vision of equity and sanction for Jews as citizens in the countries in which they were born. Hence the bitter retort, "Hatred toward us will poison you like mice."

In the mythic world of Genesis, invoked in "The Heart's Voice," word and deed coincide, and naming is being. Thus Judah is leonine when anointed lion, and, by extension, so are the Jewish People. In the Holocaust, word and deed also coincide, but the archetypal myth has been displaced by a modern one. What is implied rather than explicitly stated in "To the Anniversary..." is that the process of naming and

being causes the namer to transform the named into an Ungeziefer to be expelled from the human community and exterminated in gas chambers. It is then not the Jews who have "immured" themselves, as Sutzkever initially charges, but rather the Germans and their collaborators who have hurled the Jews into ghettos and concentration camps where they are being systematically killed. That "Nothing from the free world smiles upon us/ Nothing commiserates" is hardly the fate Jews elected for themselves. This is the poet's crystalline realization of a knowledge that he possessed anyway. Perhaps the very process of writing "To the anniversary of the Ghetto Theatre" helps him distill his conflicting emotions; for in the end, he directs his invective against the murderers rather than the victims.

Although Sutzkever's fury is intense and despair profound, the last is not absolute. For the memory of shtetl integrity causes him to affirm that which made Jewish continuity possible and which he vilified in "The Heart's Voice:" "Our wounds love alone will heal." The third stanza of "To the Anniversary of the Ghetto Theatre" orchestrates this affirmation. "And as long as the outside is yours/ Ours is the ghetto, here shall we lie/ And from the divine heart knead a redeemer/ And polish a tune."

The redeemer is not the providential Messiah, but rather the collective will of the people to transcend, as they had done in the past, the inferno into which they have now been

catapulted. In the present catastrophe, this quest can be attained, Sutzkever believes, by a conscious reconciliation of the spiritual energy associated with the diaspora and the renewed spirit of political rebellion and armed resistance, articulated in the biblical paradigms.

The two stanzas that follow and that constitute the second part of the poem, by their very length (fourteen and eighteen lines, respectively), stand in opposition to the initial three four-line strophes of the first part. The inordinate length of the second part seems less planned by the poet than spontaneously arising from the occasion. Reflecting unhampered emotions, the poet's ardent words--augmented by a rapid iambic meter, multiple line sentences, some marked by enjambments that further amplify the urgency of his exhortations--impell the "ragged and walled-in" actors and musicians to commemorate the first anniversary of the ghetto theatre with song and music. This they must do to keep their individual and collective souls alive. For that reason, the images of violence and death that are invoked during the ceremony are metaphoric and indirect, in essence a form of periphrasis. For Sutzkever uses language as a defense system. His reluctance to name the actual form of death--whether it be in the pits of Ponary or gas chambers elsewhere--is intended to protect the sensibilities of the audience and performers alike. Nonetheless, such surreal metaphors of death as "Life shrinks like hair on fire/ ...red drops of our closest kin sizzle on the stones/ and the little

streets thrash like poultry not quite slaughtered,/ and can neither raise themselves, fly away nor disappear" convey not only the violence with which the Jews were murdered, but also the helplessness of their situation. Yet Sutzkever urges them to carry on. Even those "fiddlers" who are dispirited must now exhume the fiddles that they had "planted" in the ruins of their homes, so that they, too, may play "And pinch out the most profound tones!" These tones, the poet commands, must "be carried over your remains,/ "And roam far, where a Jew still twinkles.../ Where a heart still flutters in anticipation of a message./ Let them be carried over fields, over frontlines,/ Clear and resonant like the spirit of a slaughtered child,/ Resounding and strong like the charge of our guns and powder,/ That will tomorrow, the day after tomorrow/ Play from the rooftops."

These lines reveal the tireless affirmation of Yiddish life, love of the Yiddish language, the tradition of hope, the cultural activities, including theatre in such pits of darkness as the Vilna Ghetto. Like an ancient prophet, Sutzkever urges the ragged and starving actors, singers, musicians, and their audience to fight back with all the weapons they have: with their stubborn song that must be "carried over their remains" to reach those remote places in the world "where a Jew still twinkles." These words of desperate exaltation arise from the suspicion that most of European Jewry had already been destroyed. Yet the pulse of

hope to establish a nexus with those Jews who are still alive in "some remote places" beats relentlessly. For this nexus, Sutzkever intimates, is a vehicle of assertion of the indomitable unity of Israel--a unity that is expressed in the liturgical "Prayer for the Moon," for example, as "All Israel is interwoven in friendship." Moreover, this unity is both aggadically (theologically) and halakhically (canons of Jewish conduct and law) ordained.

In the present nightmare, Sutzkever seeks to invest the pacifism of this universal Jewish solidarity with a solidarity in arms. For it is precisely this tradition of unity that will carry the immortal tune of the "spirit of the slaughtered child" and convey to the hearts that "flutter in anticipation of a message" that some Jews are still alive in the landscape of death; that they are fired with a will to fight back; that they desperately need weapons.

The affective significance of these lines is embodied both in the image of a "slaughtered child" and a vision of bullets "that will tomorrow, the day after tomorrow/ Play from the rooftops." The substantive, the "slaughtered child" is a synecdoche that suggests the martyrdom of the Jewish people. The deliberate figure conjures up images of auto-da-fes and other sacrificial altars, including the present chimneys, on which hosts of innocent Jews were laid. That ritual murder is implied is made emphatic by the symbolic use of "slaughtered" rather than the more neutral word "killed." The vision of bullets--bullets that will soon

resist Nazi barbarism--is a vision both of desperate trust in the courage of the Jewish people and desperate hope that help will come from abroad. That the latter evaporated with the smoke of the Jews is a tragic fact of history. The former, however, was translated into numerous instances of underground resistance, proliferating in such wildernesses as Narocze and Rudnicka Forests near Vilna. Indeed, Sutzkever himself played an important role as a partisan in the Narocze Forests.

"To the Anniversary of the Ghetto Theatre" reveals a sensibility that is more charitably disposed to the "failure" of the Jews to engage in military resistance than does "The Heart's Voice." Perhaps a deeper understanding of the unusual peril facing the Jews and the unparalleled limitations closing in upon them subdued Sutzkever's anger and modulated his tone of voice. While his anger and despair never abated and his determination to fight back never faltered, his exhortations to do so were tempered by a realization of the unique problems that armed resistance presented to the Jews. When he wrote "To the Anniversary..." and the subsequent political poems, he was a year or two older and himself probably crushed by the weight of the ghetto walls.

Nonetheless, "The Heart's Voice" is important not only because of the honesty of youthful exasperation or the nobility of the vision and dignity of images, but also

because it illuminates one of the levels of human consciousness in its relation to the unfolding tragedy.

It is also noteworthy that perhaps more than any other of Sutzkever's poems, "The Heart's Voice" takes its analogue from Chaim Nachman Bialik's (1873-1934) seminal poem, "In the Slaughter Town." This Hebrew work written in 1903 in response to the bloody Kishinev pogrom, is a fiery call to rebellion against Jewish history and Jewish fate. Bialik, like his follower, Sutzkever, bitterly chastizes his people for their acquiescence in the face of atrocity, and in God's own name calls for rebellion and revenge:

Why do they pray? Why do they lift their hands?
Where is their fist? Where is the thunderbolt
That will settle accounts for all the generations,
And lay the world in ruins, tear down the heavens,
And overturn My Throne.⁶

And like Sutzkever's, Bialik's poem, having failed to provide a strategy for action, is in the end a wail of anguish. It is significant that "The City of Slaughter" closes with these words of despair:

And now enough! Flee, man, now flee forever!
Flee to the desert, and there go mad!
Tear your soul into a thousand pieces,
And fling your heart to the wild dogs,
And let your tear fall upon stones,
And your cry be swallowed by the Storm.⁷

Apparently each poet, in the nightmare of his peculiar experience, allows his lyric self to intimate the truth that it intuitively knows--namely, that the Jews are a dispersed people with an uncompromising identity and religion and that they are beleaguered by Christian enmity. Still, the power

of "The City of Slaughter" was such that it motivated the formation of numerous Jewish self-defense groups (Zelbshuts) in various parts of Eastern Europe, merging with other political grass roots movements during the Holocaust.

Before the waves of mass deportations and killings, these groups, often inspired by the poets' vision, constituted a phalanx whose program reflected pre-war values--namely, the determination to defend and sustain not only the physical but also the moral and cultural life of the people. While these organizations were to become the backbone of armed resistance, their early activities involved the founding of or participation in a multitude of other para-political entities, essentially self-help societies that proliferated in various ghettos. Such ghettos as Warsaw or Vilna, possibly because of their size and density of population, provided the most fertile soil for a whole spectrum of political and quasi-political organizations. In the Warsaw Ghetto, these organizations included the Anti-Fascist Bloc whose stated program was not only to form self-defense cadres, but also to enlist the forces of international and local resistance movements in order to secure Jewish, national, as well as social liberation (in hindsight, a quixotic vision). Another combat unit, Jewish Combat Forces (Zydowska Organizacja Bojowa, ZOB), being more realistic and having as its constituent members various Zionist and Socialist organizations, staged the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In the Vilna Ghetto, the various Zionist and other political

movements became the nucleus that was later to form the United Partisans Organization (Faraynikte Partizaner Organizatsye, FPO) and that carried on armed resistance in the Rudnicka and Narocze Forests.

The first reports of mass gassing of Jews, brought by escaped witnesses, were met with incredulity by the Jewish population. Blinded by a tradition of faith in the inherent decency of humanity, the Jews could not believe that a nation rooted in the bedrock of Western Civilization would produce Auschwitz, the Arschloch der Welt, as the Germans aptly dubbed this place. But then, the rest of the world could not credit either German behavior in the occupied territories. Indeed, as Hanna Arendt writes in The Origins of Totalitarianism, the Nazis counted both on the improbability of their colossal crime and the world's inability to believe the reports that might be brought to its attention. "Hitler circulated millions of copies of his book in which he stated that to be successful, a lie must be enormous--which did not prevent people from believing him as, similarly, the Nazi's proclamations, repeated ad nauseum that the Jews would be exterminated like bad bugs (i.e. with poison gas) prevented anybody from not believing them." 8

The issue of armed resistance, though seriously advanced by the underground, was initially rejected by many people, because of the savage Nazi reprisals. The collective responsibility of the entire Jewish community for a single

German life curtailed the urge for revenge even on the part of the boldest activists. The turning point was the growing awareness that there was no hope of survival. Devitalized by starvation, economic blockades, epidemic disease, and terror, the Jews of Warsaw were the first in all of Nazidom to stage an act of armed resistance. This event was to become the best known, though by no means the only act of Jewish rebellion. Singling out the Warsaw Ghetto, Alexander Donat writes that these uprisings "without hope of victory in life" were unparalleled.

There can be no struggle without hope. Why does the man unjustly condemned to death fail to turn on his guards as he is led to the gallows? Why did the three thousand Turkish prisoners Napoleon ordered drowned put up no resistance? Why did fifty thousand French Huguenots permit themselves to be slaughtered in a single night by the French Catholics? And what of the Armenians? There is no precedent for the eventual uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto because it was undertaken solely for death with dignity and without the slightest hope of victory in life.⁹

The existential and metaphysical implications of "death with dignity and without the slightest hope of victory" are themes that inform Wladyslaw Szlengel's poem, "Kontratak" (Counterattack). Coupled with these is the theme of revenge as a vehicle of reclamation of Jewish honor--obviously a concern shared by many people in the Holocaust. Inspired by an insurrection that took place in the Warsaw Ghetto on January 18, 1943, "Counterattack" provides not only an account of this revolt, but it also projects a prophetic vision of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising that was to take place

in April.

Spokojnie szli do wagonow, jakby im wszystko zbrzydlo,
Piesko patrzyli szaulisom w oczy--bydlo!
Cieszyli sie sliczni oficerkowie, ze nic nie dziala im
na nerwy,

Ze ida tepym marszem hordy,
--I tylko dla werwy
Trzaskaly pejcze: w mordy!
Tlum milczac padal na placu,
Nim sie w wagonie rozelkal,
Saczyli krew i lzy w piaczysty grunt,
A "panowie" na trupy od niechcenia rzucali pudelka--
"Warum sind Juno rund."

Az w ten dzien, gdy na uspihone sztymungiem miasto
Wpadli o swicie, jak hieny z porannej mgly,
Wtedy zbudzilo sie bydlo i obnarzylo kly.
Na ulicy Milej padl pierwszy strzal,
Zandarm sie zachwial w bramie,
Spojrzal zdziwiony--chwile stal,
Pomacal roztrzaskane ramie--
Nie wierzyl.
Cos tu nie jest w porzadku,
Tak wszystko szlo gladko i w prost,
Z laski i protekcji
Cofnieto go z drogi na Ost
(Mial kilka dni satisfakcji),
Aby odpoczal w Warszawie,
Gnajak to bydlo w akcji,
I aby oczyszcic ten chlew,
A tu na Milej ulicy KREW...
Zandarm sie cofnal z bramy
I zaklal"--Naprawde krwawie,
A tu juz szczekaly brauningi
Na Niskiej, na Dzikiej, na Pawiej.
Na kretych schodach, gdzie matke stara
Ciagnieto za wlosy na dol,
Lezy esesman Handtke.
Bardzo dziwnie sie nadal,
Jakby nie strawil smierci, jakby go zdlawil ten bunt.
Zacharkal sie krwawa slina w pudelko--"Juno sind
rund", rund, rund.

Pyl wdeptac zloconym szlifem,
Okraglo wszystko sie toczy,
Lezy blekitny zandarmi uniform
Na zapluty schodach zydzowskiej Pawiej ulicy i nie wie,
Ze u Szultza i Toebbensa
Kule plasaja sie w radosnym rozspiewie,
BUNT MIESA,
BUNT MIESA,
BUNT MIESA!
Mieso pluje przez okno granatem.
Mieso charczy szkarlatnym plomieniem i zrebrow zycia sie

czepia!
 Hej! Jak radosnie strzela sie w slepia!
 TU JEST FRONT, PANICZYKI!
 HIER
 TRINKT MAN MEHR KEIN BIER,
 HIER
 HIER HAT MAN MEHR KEIN MUT,
 BLUT,
 BLUT,
 BLUT.
 Zdejmowac rekawiczki z jasnej, gladkiej skory,
 Polozyc pejcze--dac helmy na glowy--
 Jutro komunikat dac prasowy:
 "Wbilismy sie klinem w blok Toebbensa."
 Bunt miesa.
 BUNT MIESA,
 SPIEW MIESA!
 Slyszy niemiecki Boze,
 Jak modla sie Zydzi w dzikich domach,
 Trzymajac w reku lom czy zierdz.
 Prosimy Cie, Boze, o walke krwawa.
 Blagamy Cie o gwałtowna smierc.
 Niech nasze oczy przed skonaniem
 Nie widza jak sie wloka szyny,
 Ale daj dloniom celnosc, Panie,
 Aby sie skrwawil mundur siny,
 Daj nam zobaczyc, zanim gardla
 Zawrze ostatni, gluchy jek,
 W tych butnych dloniach, w lapach z pejczem
 Zwyczajny nasz czlowieczny lek.
 Jak purpurowe krwiste kwiaty,
 Z Niskiej i z Milej, z Muranowa,
 Wykwita plomien z naszych luf.
 To wiosna nasza! To kontratak!
 To wino walki uderza do glow!
 To nasze lasy partyzanckie,
 Zaulki Dzikiej i Ostrowskiej.
 Drza nam na persiach numerki "blokowe",
 Nasze medale wojny zydzowskiej.
 Krzyk czterech liter blyska czerwienia,
 Jak taran bije slowo: BUNT

A na ulicy krwia sie oblepia
 Zdeptana paczka:
 "JUNO SIND RUND!"¹⁰

Peacefully they walked to the train, sick and tired of
 the daily battle,
 Doggedly gaze into the brutal eyes did the cattle.
 The handsome officers gloated that they are bothered
 by nothing,
 That with a dull step the hordes are marching,
 And only for diversion

The whips cracked, slashing their faces!
 The throng in silence sank to the ground,
 Before it dissolved in sobs in cattle cars,
 Their blood and tears trickled into the sandy ground,
 And the "Herrenvolk" carelessly tossed little boxes
 on the corpses--

10 "Warum sin Juno rund."
 Then, on that day, when on the Stimmung lulled city
 They pounced like hyenas in dawns early mist,
 Then the cattle awakened and bared its teeth.
 On Mila Street the first shot was heard,
 A gendarme staggered at the gate,
 He stared surprised--stood still for a moment,
 Patted his shattered arm--
 Didn't believe it.

20 Something is not right,
 Everything went so smooth and straight,
 As a favor because of pull
 He was turned back from the Eastern Front
 (Had a few satisfying days),
 Rested in Warsaw,
 Driving this cattle in an "Aktion,"
 And cleaning up this pigsty,
 But here
 On Mila street, BLOOD...

30 The gendarme pulled back from the gate
 And cursed: I'm really bleeding,
 But here Braunings are clattering
 On Niska, Dzika, and Pawia Streets.
 On the crooked stairway, where they dragged an old
 mother by her hair,
 The SS-man Handtke lies
 Strangely puffed up,
 As if he couldn't digest death, as if he choked on the
 revolt.

He belched, spitting up blood into the little box--
 Juno sind rund, rund, rund.
 Crushed the dust with the high polish [of his boots],
 40 Everything goes round and around,
 The sky-blue uniform lies on the spat upon
 Stairs of the Jewish Pawia Street and doesn't know
 That at Schultz and Toebbens
 Bullets whirl in a joyous song,
 REVOLT OF THE MEAT,
 REVOLT OF THE MEAT"
 REVOLT OF THE MEAT!
 Meat spits grenades out the windows,
 Meat belches out scarlet flames and clings to the edges
 of life!

50 Hey! What joy to shoot in the eye!
 This is the front, my Lords!
 Hier trinkt man mehr kein Bier,
 Hier hat man mehr kein Mut,

BLUT,
 BLUT,
 BLUT!
 Must peel off the fair, smooth, skin gloves,
 Put aside the whips, put on helmets.
 Tomorrow issue a press release:
 60 "Penetrated the lines of Toebbens' block.
 REVOLT OF THE MEAT,
 REVOLT OF THE MEAT,
 SONG OF THE MEAT!
 Hear, O German God,
 How the Jews, in the "wild" houses pray,
 Clenching in the fist a stick, a stone.
 We beg you, O God, for a bloody battle,
 We implore you for a violent death.
 Let our eyes not see, before we expire,
 70 The stretch of the train tracks,
 But let the precise aim of our hand, O Lord,
 Stain their livid uniforms with blood,
 Let us see, before the mute groan shreds our throats,
 Our simple human fear in their
 Haughty hands, in their whip-wielding paws.
 From Niska, Mila, and Muranowska Street,
 Like scarlet blood-flowers,
 Sprout the flames of our gun-barrels
 This is our Spring! Our Counterattack!
 80 The intoxication of our battle!
 These are our partisan forests:
 The alleys of Dzika and Ostrowska Streets.
 On our breasts quiver the "block" numbers,
 Medals of this Jewish war.
 The cry of six letters flashes in scarlet,
 Like a battering ram bellows the word: REVOLT

 And on the street, the bloodied,
 Trampled packet:
 90 JUNO SIND RUND

"Counterattack," like most of Szlengel's poetry, is marked both by corrosive irony and colloquial language. These characteristics he shares with Skamander, an inter-war literary movement of young Polish poets who, rejecting causes and sharing certain similarities with the Russian Acmeists, showed in their verses a predilection for irony, satire, and colloquialisms. But Szlengel's irony is a reductio ad absurdum of the Skamander paradigm. It is thus that he

repeatedly shows the glaring absurdity inherent in the application of pre-war literary standards to Occupation literature. The violence of his world is such that it obviates any rational argument in support of aesthetic considerations, a notion, as noted in the preceding chapter, which the poets Przybos and Rozewicz came to share with Szlengel somewhat later.

"Counterattack" projects a vision of a world that has been stood on its head and that has reduced people to cattle and further to meat, displacing them to the lowest rung on the "Great Chain of Being" ladder. This realization and the violent grief arising from it, are mirrored in the structure of the poem. Its 90 lines, unhampered by any strophic architectonics, seem to fall in a torrent, getting ahead of the poet himself who apparently neither can nor will leash his volatile emotions. His technique, clearly dictated by the occasion, tends to evoke a sense of copiousness, augmenting the power of his feelings. This is further amplified by the metallic sound of the poem's rhythms and the uneven, often oblique rhyme scheme.

Written in the late stages of the ghetto, this poetic mimesis reflects the mood of those people who came face to face with the final knowledge of which Donat speaks--namely, that there is no hope of survival and that, therefore, armed resistance must be undertaken "solely for death with dignity and without the slightest hope of victory in life." This epiphany was vouchsafed them despite their initial

dehumanization, a perception that marks the opening lines of the poem and that is narrated by a persona who presents the events from the point of view of both the bestial Germans and their bovinized victims.

While gloating that nothing unnerves the hordes of Jews who are passively marching to the cattle cars, the "handsome [German] officers" are, nonetheless, bored with the unchanging scenario. To introduce a measure of excitement to the routine, they slash the faces of the condemned with their cracking whips. Like an eye of a camera, the focus suddenly shifts to the helpless "throng... before it dissolves in sobs in the cattle car." These montage-like frames project a picture of a world turned not only up-side-down but also inside-out: a hell brought to the surface of the earth. In this secular inferno, before being brought to gas chambers, the people are gratuitously whipped, shot at, and throttled in cattle cars. The chaos of this antiworld, as Szlengel intimates, is such that it voids the Nazis of humanity; it empties them of the last vestiges of empathy and compassion, and transmutes them into a demonic order of Übermenschen. Because of this metamorphosis, they perceive the enclosed world from their bestial position. Hence they see their victims as cattle on their way to the slaughter house.

In "Counterattack," Szlengel comprehends metaphorically the manifestations of this process, revealing the transformation of both the aggressor and the victim. As Szlengel sees it, the victim, too, is not impervious to the

processes of dehumanization. Thus in Sartrean terms, "the gaze of the other" determines the self-perception of the gazed-upon. Reflecting the collective consciousness of his people, the poet is a kind eiron, a suffering knower, who is partially guilty because he has hidden the secret of their shame: their present bovinization as well as general degradation as pharmaki, the scapegoats led to the altars of history.

Like Sutzkever, Szlengel despairs, and the psychic energy of his despair shifts its concentration from the victimizer to the victim in a kind of alternating cathexis. Thus like Sutzkever, Szlengel regards the condemned culpable, ignoring the viability of the various forms of spiritual resistance (discussed in the foregoing chapter) that marked the Jewish response to the Nazi assault. It is for this reason that he merely adumbrates the self-possession with which they met their death, "The throng in silence sank to the ground." Yet in "Co czytalem umarłym" (What I Read to the Dead), the poet pays homage to the dignity of their self-possession in face of the terror and anguish confronting them. "Najbardziej meczyło to, że wiedzieli co ich czeka, że wyjechali z koszmarnym bagażem prawdziwych czy nie¹¹ prawdziwych wiadomości o sposobie zabijania." (The most painful was the fact that they knew what awaits them, that they left with the nightmarish baggage of authentic or unauthentic information about the methods of killing.)

But in "Counterattack," the Jews are praised not so much for their spiritual integrity as for the armed rebellion with which they were and will be able to transcend the Nazi debasement of them. The encomium lauds the bovine, starving, ragged, and inexperienced ghetto fighters who proved their mettle in the January insurrection against the SS Goliath, armed from head to foot. It further prophesies the revolt that was to take place in April. "Then, on that day/ When on the Stimmung lulled city/ like hyenas they pounced at dawn's early mist,/ Then the cattle awakened/ And bared its teeth" (11. 10-14).

The succeeding lines reflect the results of the unfolding battle and make emphatic the fact that in certain respects the invincible Goliath is not totally bereft of all human attributes. He is afraid when attacked, he bleeds when shot, and dies when killed. Although he finds it hard to believe, he shares these basic human characteristics with the bovine Jews. Thus incredulous that a Jewish bullet shattered his arm, an SSman, who because of political favoritism came from the Eastern Front to the Warsaw Ghetto for a respite and a few days of distraction by rounding up "the cattle in an Aktion" (1. 26), perceives the unexpected Jewish bullet as the very cause of the sudden disruption of the basic cosmic unity. "Something is not right" (1. 20), he proclaims surprised. Far greater is the shock of another German who lies dying at the bottom of the stairs "down which an old mother had been pulled by her hair" (1. 34).

As the poem unfolds, Szlengel's irony becomes progressively more corrosive--a tone that is in direct proportion to his belief that the fighting Jews have tipped the balance of the day. The narrative voice, marked as it is by a split point of view, evokes in the successive lines an image of reflecting mirrors in which the Nazified perception of the world and the Jew is reflected in the Jewish mirror in an ironic tour de force. Thus the block letters anaphora, "REVOLT OF THE MEAT,/ REVOLT OF THE MEAT,/ REVOLT OF THE MEAT!" (ll. 45-7). And so while the SS are stunned by the Jewish rebellion and, hence, the sudden disruption of the cosmic order, the "cattle," reduced even further to "meat," have finally shown to the Nazis and the world, but above all to themselves, what that "meat" can do. "Meat spits grenades out the windows./ Meat belches out scarlet flames/ And clings to the edges of life!/ Hey! What joy to shoot in the eye!" (ll. 48-50).

Both the irony and fury reach a cumulative climax in the poem's closing lines. In fierce yet simple ghetto slang, the poet lays bare the desperate exaltation and hopeless grandeur of the fighting Jews, while he prays in mock prostration to the German God. (German self-divinization was commonplace in the Holocaust. Displacing the traditional concept of God with the image of a Germanic Aryan, the SS flaunted their divinity, especially when they bullied and tortured pious old Jews, taunting them that the god of the Jews is either

impotent or indifferent to their agony and supplications for deliverance.)

In his execrations, the poet invokes the "wild" houses (l. 66)--tenements in the ghetto that were emptied of their inhabitants during the bloody "Aktionen." In the interludes, these buildings were transformed into temporary sanctuaries for those Jews who were unable to secure work permits. Without these coveted pieces of paper, no Jew could be assigned to any of the "blocks" (l. 60), German slave factories in the Warsaw Ghetto, including those of Schulz and Toebebens (l. 43). These people were not allowed to be in the ghetto and, hence, had no right to live.

Inspired by the January insurrection and anticipating another "Counterattack," Szlengel foresaw the "wild" asylums as the sacred grounds on which the "meat," clinging "to the edges of life," would be transubstantiated into fierce resistance units. In his prevision of "this Jewish war" (l. 85), the poet entertains no delusions of survival. Indeed, he longs for a violent death" (l. 69)--one that will signal the dignity of the fearless battle that the Jews will have staged. This will pre-empt "the stretch of the train tracks" leading to Treblinka, and above all, satisfy their craving to "see, before the mute groan shreds... [their] throats,/ ...[their] simple human fear in the "haughty hands, in [the] whip-wielding paws" of the Germans (ll. 70-75).

The more impassioned the poet's vision of the revolt, the darker and richer become his conceits. Such images as

"flames," "like scarlet blood-flowers," sprouting from "gun-barrels" (ll. 77,8) or as street alleys transforming themselves into "partisan forests" (ll. 81,2) tend to transport the reader from the expository to the imaginative effect of the poem. The poet who seems to have a clear vision of what he describes--namely, the "intoxication" of the arriving Jewish Spring with its surreal forests and flowers--creates a nexus of empathy between himself and the reader. Thus the reader sees what the poet imagines and exalts in Szlengel's realized vision.

Many poets came of age during the unfolding apocalypse not only inspiring or exhorting the people to rebellion, but actually participating in it. In so doing, they transformed word into deed. For Sutzkever, who was a leading partisan, this provided the historical anchor that he sought in "The Heart's Voice," fixing the Jewish response to aggression in the biblical paradigm: "an eye-for-an-eye." Whereas in the past, as David Roskies writes, "the traditional domain of poetry among the Ashkenazic (European) Jews was the synagogue."¹² Among such gun-wielding poets as Sutzkever, the domain of poetry was the frontline of underground resistance.

Two examples of such poems are Shmerke Katcherginsky's "Partizaner Marsh," August, 1943 (March of the Partisans) and Abraham Sutzkever's "Baglaytlid Baym Aroysgeyn in Vald," September 10, 1943 (Song to Accompany the Departure to the

Forest). The two works were written within a few weeks of each other, when each of the poets set out for the forest with a contingent of other partisans. Mediated by opposing ideologies, the poems reveal two rather typical aspects in the spectrum of political responses to the catastrophe. Katcherginsky's poem unveils an universalist vision that locates hope in the fundamental fraternity of Communism. Redemption both Jewish and Gentile will come, according to this writer, through the integrated efforts of the world's working classes. In fact, it is this solidarity alone that will defeat the Nazis. Sutzkever's "Song to Accompany the Departure to the Forest," on the other hand, lays bare, as does all of his work, his indivisible identification with Jewish particularism. Cognizant of the deadly isolation of the Jews, the poet believes that Jewish redemption will come only through the mystical, though secular, link between the prostrated ghetto Jew and his upright biblical ancestors.

"Partisan March" is an artless poem, written in folkbardic language, devoid of rhetorical embellishments and extraneous metaphors.

Der veg is shver, mir veysn
 Der kamf nit laykht, kayn shpil.
 A partizan zayn lebm leygt in shlakht,
 Far groysn frayhayt tsil.

Tsuzing

-- Hey F.P.O.!
 -- Mir zaynen do!
 Mutik un drayste tsum shlakht,
 Partizaner nokh Haynt
 Geyen shlogn dem faynt,
 Inhem kamf far an arbeter makht.

Es zaynen fest di glhider,
Gemuskl't in shtol un in blay,
Mir zaynen bloyz oyf haynt funhem ghetto aroys --
Kday morgn aykh tsu brengen di fray!

Hey F.P.O.!...

Baym blut fun shvester, brhider,
Mir shvern tsu kemfn biz van --
Mit Hitler's yeder glid baputst vet zayn,
Di vafn fun partizan.

13

Hey F.P.O.!...

(The road is difficult, we know/ the combat not easy, no
game./ A partisan lays down his life in battle,/ For
great freedom's sake.

Refrain

Hey F.P.O.!/ We are here!/ Bold and daring, ready for
battle./ Partisans this very day/ Will defeat the fiend,/ In
the struggle for workers' power.

The limbs are strong,/ Muscled with steal and lead,/ We
are leaving the ghetto today/ In order to bring you
freedom tomorrow.

Hey F.P.O.!...

Upon the blood of our sisters and brothers,/ We vow to fight
until/ Hitler's every limb will decorate/ the weapons of the
partisans.

Hey! F.P.O.!...

This simple marshal hymn uses all the standard topoi
associated with this genre. Thus, to inspire courage and
fortitude, the poet lists the formidable obstacles facing the
partisans: the difficult road, the bloody battles, and the
mandate to destroy the enemy. The visionary Marxist
ideology is the poem's only salient feature, calling for
partisans to lay down their lives in the name of both
universal freedom and "worker's power."

"Partisan March" was written in August, 1943, after the uprising and destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto and the obliteration of most other ghettos--Vilna to be officially liquidated in September, a few weeks later. By this time thousands of Jews had already been killed and buried in the mass graves of Ponary, only ten kilometers from Vilna, while the Allies and the world stood by indifferently.

Katcherginsky must have by then realized the total isolation of the Jews, and he must have known that they could not count on the support of the outside world. One would, therefore, expect that his sense of bitterness would be so complete as to cause him to disdain the world and reject the view of working-class fraternity. Apparently his faith was not crushed nor was his trust in the Soviet Union totally destroyed.

Indeed Russia was to prove the last bastion of hope for the beleaguered Jewish partisans. The Soviet Union, unlike such Polish independence organizations as "The Home Army" (Armja Krajowa), was willing to help the Jewish partisans to defeat their common enemy. Consequently, those Jewish combatants who could somehow obtain weapons--a Soviet prerequisite for joining the partisan units--were incorporated into the Russian supervised partisan brigades. However, since many Jewish partisans, although fiercely determined to fight the Nazis, could not obtain the required firearms, their presence among the fighting battalions was challenged by Soviet authorities. A case in point is Major

General Klimov who was flown in from Moscow to survey the partisan movement in White Russia. Katcherginsky, himself, assumed the responsibility of explaining to Klimov the insurmountable difficulties that the Jews encountered in obtaining weapons.¹⁴ More vulnerable to attack than their armed counterpart, the majority of weaponless Jews suffered heavy casualties in the forests. However, where weapons posed no problem, the Jewish brigades, on the whole, were able to join the various united battalions in a relentless campaign against German installations.¹⁵ Quixotic a vision as it may have been, Katcherginsky's faith found an anchor, however grudging, in Soviet pragmatism.

Unlike Katcherginsky, Sutzkever sought in the ideology of Jewish particularism a vehicle of ending the role of the Jew as victim of History. That a feat of such Gargantuan proportions might be accomplished by a people engulfed in the Holocaust--when powerful and sovereign nations in Europe collapsed under a less formidable assault--Sutzkever's poetic self apparently did not permit itself to doubt. His vision may have been partially shaped by his despair and by his participation in Jewish resistance. Hence not a helpless victim, he was able to translate the exalted dream of "The Heart's Voice" into the reality of combat and revenge. In "Departure to the Forest Song," he, therefore, speaks with the authority of experience about the emergence "of future sons" who are atavistically and metaphysically linked to the

heroic Maccabees.

Vakst aroys, ir heldn--feste ayngeshparte yungen,
Vakst aroys, ir tsukunftzin, un zayt der velt bavust.
Gor der viln funem folk, untererd farshlungen'
Kleyet zikh--lavendicker shtram in ayer Brust.

Oyb es hot fardjavert in der voglenish dos ayzn,
Faylt fun im arop di nekhtns un im shlayft atsind.
Keyn mol iz nit shpet dem folks nekomah tsu bavayzn,
Oyftsukoyfn mit gever di doyrosdicke zin.

S'hobn shtet farvandlt zikh in shtaynerne farreter,
Tsugeshtidt tsu zindicke grhiber ayer gang.
Hobn velder aykh bagrist mit zingendicke bletter:
--Kumt tsu undz, ir tayere, un laytert dem ferlang.

Loyb tsu aykh, ir nay-gezalbte gvuredicke geyer,
Ayer fhus hot opgeshtupt dem lokerdikn rand.
S'hot in aykh a glants geton der rhum fun Maccabeyer,
Vi mit yorn tsvay toysnt tsurick in eygn land.

Shtendick zenen do tsu dr'erd geboygenhe un midhe.
Vey dem knekht in hofenenug oyf rakhmim--by a knekht.
Vi di Maccabeyer blozt funander di mridah,
Zol der kovet oyf loykhtn in shverdikh gefekht!16

(Sprout forth, you heroes--strong, stubborn lads,/ Sprout
forth, you future sons, and become known in the world./ The
entire will of the people has been swallowed by the earth,/ A
lava-like surge is shaping itself in your breast.

If the sword had rusted in uncertainties,/ File away from it
its yesterdays and polish its today./ It is never too late
to show the people's vengeance,/ To redeem with weapons the
long lasting sin.

Cities have been transfigured into betrayers of stone,/ Chained
to sinful graves your path./ Forests, therefore, greeted you
with singing leaves:/ Come to us, dear ones and refine your demand.

Be praised, you newly anointed strong questers,/ Your foot
has pushed back the lurking brink./ The glory of the Maccabees
has suddenly shone within you,/ Just as it did two-thousand
years ago in our own land.

There are always those who stoop to the earth and the tired./
Woe to the slave who hopes for mercy--from a slave./ Like the
Maccabees spread all over the rebellion,/ Let our honor shine
again in the fencing sword.)

In the typical Sutzkeverian tension between stately form and dynamic content, this poem invokes the authority of ancient paradigms to rouse in the fighting Jew the awareness that, standing alone, he must seek both spiritual and physical strength in the memory of heroic Jewish archetypes. It is from this mythic consciousness that the heroic deeds of the partisans will "sprout forth," as the numinous image, "Vakst aroys ir tsukunftzin" (literally, "Grow from the earth, you future sons") suggests. Although "the entire will of the people has been swallowed by the earth," the partisans can reforge themselves by means of the transcendental "lava-like surge" that erupts from the soil of biblical reality. And it is this historical anima that will inspire the partisans to remove from their swords "the rust of [yesterday's] uncertainties" and to redeem "the long lasting sin" with newly polished weapons.

The tension of these lines is embodied in the ambiguous substantive, "the long lasting sin." This iconograph suggests two meanings, namely, the sin of Jewish passivity and the sin of the endless chain of crimes visited upon the Jews. That the second meaning carries more weight is signaled by the sudden shift of tone and imagery in the third strophe. While the two preceding and the two following strophes are marked by a haughty tone, the pivotal third one echoes with cadences of unmistakable Jewish exhaustion. This weariness derives from the implacable hatred toward Jews that has culminated in the present catastrophe. The dual image of

cities that "have been transfigured into betrayers of stone" and that have "chained to sinful graves your path," suggests that Jewish destiny, notably the present cataclysm, has resulted from "sins" connected with that hatred and persecution rather than with the Jewish ethos.

Since most of civilized urban Europe and especially the cities of Poland have become a Jewish "grave," the handful of beleaguered Jewish resistance fighters must turn to Poland's primordial forests to "refine their demand"--that is, to affirm the right of Jews to share this planet with other people, to defend that right by waging a war of resistance, however futile it may be at this time of unmitigated tyranny, and thus to redeem Jewish honor.

The desolate image of the city, the traditional asylum of Jews escaping from the pogroms of small shtetls or villages, is intensified by an ironic invocation of nature, the romantic source of solace to human suffering. The irony is heightened by the quasi hypsos use of the hyperbaton, "hobn velder (begin did forests) instead of the more natural syntax, "velder hobn" (forests began) and earlier, "S'hobn shtet" (begin did cities) instead of "Shtet hobn" (cities began). This coupled with the falling spondaic rhythm of the verses intensifies the tone of fathomless weariness.

The final images of the poem unite catastrophe and redemption, drawing to themselves once more, the mystical vision of Jewish past and present. The synthesis of this

dialectic is a new progeny, "The newly anointed mighty questers," the "future sons" of both the glorious Maccabees and the exhausted, decimated modern Jews, whose sword must resurrect Jewish honor.

Interestingly, the virtually insurmountable difficulties in obtaining the necessary weapons in order to translate a vision of resistance into cold reality is passed over by Sutzkever in this as well as most of his other political poetry. Only one poem, "Di Blayene Platn fun Roms Drukeray (The Lead Plates of the Rom Press), attests to one of the ways in which the Jews were able to obtain weapons.

Mir hobn vi finger geshtrekte durkh gratn
Tsu fangen di likhticke luft fun der fray--
Durkh nakht zikh getsoygn, tsu nehmen di platn,
Di blayene platn fun Rom's druckeray.
Mir, troymer, itst vern soldatn
Un shemltsn dem gayst funem blay.

Un mir hobn vihder gheefnt dem shtempl
Tsu ehpes a haymisher aybicker hayl.
Mit shotns bapantsert, bay shayn fun a lepml--
Gegosn oyses--a tsayl nokh a tsayl,
Azoy vi di zeydes a mol inem temple
In gildhene yom-tov-menoyres--dem oyl.

Dos blay hot geloykhtn baym oysgisn koyln,
Makhshoves--tsegangen an oys nokh an oys.
A shurhe fun Bovl, a shurhe fun Poyln,
Gezotn, geflaytst in der zelbicker mos.
Di Yiddishe gvurah, in verter farhoyln,
Muz oyfraysn itster di velt mit a shos!

Un ver s'hot in ghetto gezen dos kle-zayen
Farklamert in heldishe Yiddishe hent--
Gezen hot er ranglen zikh Yerushulaim,
Dos faln fun yenhe granitenhe vent;
Farnumhen di verter, farshmoltsn in blayen,
Un zayere shtimen in hartsn derkent.¹⁷

Like fingers reaching out of cages/ To grasp the luminous
air of freedom--/ We moved through the night to take the
plates,/ The lead plates of the Rom Press./ We, dreamers,

must now become soldiers/ And into bullets melt down the
soul of the lead.

And again we opened the seal/ Of a strangely familiar,
eternal cave./ With shadows shielded in the glow of a
lamp--We poured the letters--one after the other,/ Just
like our grandfather, long ago in the temple,/ Into the
golden-holiday-menorahs--[poured] the oil.

The lead shone when forged into bullets,/ Each letter
dissolving after the other./ A verse from Babylon, a
verse from Poland,/ Boiling, gushing in the same measure./
Jewish might rooted in the word/ In a salvo of bullets
must now shatter the world!

And he who saw the weapons in the ghetto/ Clenched in the
heroic Jewish hands--He saw Jerusalem struggling,/ The
fall of those granite walls; He comprehended the meaning
of the molten words,/ And in his heart recognized their
voice.

This highly polished poem with its tight construction
and perfect rhyme scheme (ababab; cdcdcd; efefef; etc,) like
all of Sutzkever's hortatory poetry locates a link between
past and present. Hence images of contemporary events
coalesce with historically, liturgically, and anagogically
allusive language. But central to the poem--though intimated
rather than explicitly stated--is the insurmountable problem
the Jews faced in staging any act of armed resistance.
Obviously, resistance was at best a formidable task in all of
the Nazi occupied countries; however, whereas the non-Jewish
underground was militarily and morally supported by the
population of their respective countries and by their
governments in exile, the Jews of Poland had to face not only
the Germans but the largely hostile Poles as well. Subject
to anti-Semitism even before the racist doctrines promulgated
in Nuremberg, during the war, the Jews were exposed to ever

increasing Polish enmity toward them. There were, of course, righteous Poles who agonized over the Jewish catastrophe and Polish anti-Semitism and who risked their own lives to help the trapped Jews; but they constituted a very small minority. The tragedy that this fact reveals is that non-Jews could have helped, but very few chose to do so. On balance more Jews were denounced to the Nazis than were saved.

A case in point are the two Polish independence organizations: Armja Ludowa (A.L.) (People's Army) and Armja Krajowa (A.K.) (Home Army). The rather weak Socialist A.L. accepted into its ranks those Jews who made it to the forests. On the other hand, the official and more powerful A.K.,--notably its right wing division, Narodowe sily zbrojne (National Armed Forces--with few individual exceptions, was known to murder Jews during and even after the war.¹⁸ When Z.O.B. (Jewish Combat Organization), for example, whose total Warsaw Ghetto arsenal in July, 1942, was one pistol, appealed for arms, the A.K.--which was supervised by the Polish emigre government centered in London--refused, according to Itzhak¹⁹ Zukerman, to comply with the plea. "As late as January, 1943," writes Ber Mark:

The commander-in-chief of A.K., 'Grot' (General Stefan Rowecki), wrote secretly to London that the 'Jewish Communist' circles in the [Warsaw] ghetto (meaning the Fighting Organization) wanted weapons, but he was not sure that they could make use of them, and perhaps they should not be given any. Later the A.K. did provide some arms, but by that time the insurgents had taken to manufacturing their own or buying them from German and Italian marauders at outlandish prices.²⁰

Thus the Jewish "insurgents had taken to manufacturing their own" arms by such methods as breaking into their own, and in fact, one of the greatest Jewish publishing houses in Eastern Europe, stealing and recasting lead plates into bullets, as Sutzkever testifies in "The Lead Plates of the Rom Press."

Characteristically, Sutzkever's technique of commemorating this event interweaves poetry of bold statement with enigmatic constellations of words that erupt into singular images or dissolve into mystical utterances. The simile, "Like fingers reaching out of cages/ To grasp the luminous air of freedom," suggests despair and, above all, determination so absolute that it produces a state of disembodiment, a dissolution of selfhood. These adroit fingers are the metamorphosed Jewish "dreamers" who, in their protean state, are further transformed into "soldiers" who must "melt down the soul of the lead" into "bullets." These images, recalling hieroglyphic notations, resonate with layers of meaning. "Dreamers" is an allusion, among other things, to the shapers of diaspora culture with its essential pacifism, love of scholarship, and devotion to the study and interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. "Dreamers" conjures up images of generations of Talmudic scholars, Midrashic writers, and other commentators, reverentially exploring the mystical meanings of such theosophic doctrines as the Zohar or the Cabala. These "dreamers" must now strike a blow at

the very "soul" of diaspora culture. For not only must they become "soldiers," but they also have to initiate an act of sacrilegious significance: the transformation of rows of sacrosanct letters into bullets. Thus the coveted literary record of the diaspora, immortalized in "A verse from Babylon (the inception of diaspora culture), a verse from Poland" and imprinted in the very soul of the lead plates must be destroyed to defend the honor, if not the survival of that culture.

These pensive words lay bare, once more, Sutzkever's deep reverence for the distinctive diaspora ethos. And it is with a sense of deep grief that he notes the necessity to give up these cherished values: "Jewish might rooted in the word/ In a salvo of bullets must now shatter the world."

The second and fourth strophes are an attempt to ameliorate this deep sense of tragedy by linking it with ancient ones, notably with the attempt of the Greeks to Hellenize and thus destroy Judaism in 198 B.C.E. However, the Jews repelled the enforced assimilation by staging a guerilla rebellion which was led by Judah the Maccabee (the Hebrew word for "hammer"). In 164 B.C.E., when the Jews recaptured Jerusalem, they purged the temple of the pagan defilement and rededicated it to Jehova. This victory is commemorated as Hanukkah, the Feast of Lights. Sutzkever, who like the other dreamers-turned-soldiers carries the memory of this event in his heart, generates symbols to link the past and present. Hence the mystical network of words in

the second strophe: "And again we opened the seal/ Of the strangely familiar, eternal cave." The "seal" suggests the separation of past and present, while the "cave" denotes the "heart" where the transcendental memory of Jerusalem is lodged. And so, the newly anointed soldiers of Sutzkever's poem pour the molten verses into bullets just like their grandfathers, the Maccabees, poured "Into the golden-holiday-menorah... the oil" with which they purged the temple of all idols.

The closing lines of the poem are a subtle attempt to justify the metamorphosis of the Jew, the dreamer-turned-soldier, as well as the transformation of rows of type into bullets. This justification is couched in the evocation of a mystical link between the fighting Polish Jew and the ancient defenders of the falling "granite walls" of the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, whoever might on ethical or religious grounds question the reforging of the sacrosanct letters into bullets (probably the poet himself) will comprehend the moral efficacy "of the molten words,/ and in his heart recognize their voice"--the voice of struggling Jerusalem.

The difficulties in connection with obtaining or producing weapons prevailed not only in the ghettos of Vilna and Warsaw, but obviously in every ghetto and certainly more so in concentration camps. Nonetheless, there were rebellions in numerous places, including Cracow, Czestochowa, Bendzin, Bialystok, Auschwitz, Sobibor, and Treblinka--the

most tenacious and heroic of which, as Itzhak Zukerman (one of the leaders of the Warsaw Ghetto uprising) writes, having been "fought by the Bialystok Z.O.B."²¹ These acts of desperation were intended to determine not the manner of Jewish life--this was no longer possible--but rather one of the manners of Jewish death. In the silence of the universe in which neither God nor man took much note of the dying Jews, some of them, having fought back with everything they had--as their poetry testifies--died silent and sometimes heroic in their silence, resigned and somehow dignified in their resignation. Others died fighting with Molotov cocktails or whatever weaponry they could manufacture.

Both the predicament of the Jews and the general indifference of the world to it are evoked in a slim anthology of poetry entitled Z Otchłani (Out of the Abyss) (1944). Containing the work of such poets as Czeslaw Milosz (destined to become the Nobel Laureate for Literature), Mieczyslaw Jastrun (a much respected poet in post war Poland), and Jan Kott (who was to become an eminent Shakespearean scholar and literary critic), this anthology was microfilmed and secretly sent to London and later to New York by the Underground National Committee (Zydowski komitet narodowy). This collection of poetry on the Jewish catastrophe is a living testament of the vital, albeit futile, role poetry played in the Holocaust. For the poets, both Jewish and Christian, tried to secure help by rousing the conscience and the moral indignation in their readers

abroad.

Jakob Apenszlak, the New York editor of Out of the Abyss, comments that "wiersze te stanowią rewelacje nie tylko ze względu na okoliczności, w jakich powstały.... Mówią nam więcej o tym, co czuli, co myśleli, jak przejmowali ciosy rak zezwierzęconych Niemców niewolonicy gheft, skazanci zepchnięci na dno upokorzenia i mak cielesnych, niż suche zestawienia faktów i sprawozdania z terenu martyrologji."²²

(These poems constitute a revelation not only with regard to the conditions under which they were created.... they tell us more eloquently than a dry statement of facts and reports from the annals of martyrdom about that which the slaves of the ghettos, the condemned--plunged to the bottom of humiliation and corporal agony--felt and thought, how they accepted the blows of the bestial Germans.) Jozef Wittlin, also in New York at this time, writes, "Reka drży, język zasycha, dech zamiera--gdy czytamy te wiersze. Wstyd pali oczy, co przesuwają się po czarnych, żałobnych zedach tych pięknych a gorzkich strof. Wstyd oczom, że czytają te śpiewne relikwie zagłady i bochaterstwa, że czytają i nie ślepna."²³ (The hand trembles, language dries up, breath dies when we read these poems. Shame stings our eyes as they cross the black, funereal verses of the beautiful and bitter strophes. Shamed are the eyes that read the song-like reliquaries of destruction, that read and are not struck blind.)

That no political action would result from the moral revulsion and anguish of the few readers abroad, poets like Milosz, Kott, and Jastrun may have suspected in 1944 after most of the Polish Jews had already been killed. Nonetheless, Milosz's "Campo di Fiori" and Jastrun's "Tu takze jak w Jerusalem" (Here too Like in Jerusalem) are a last ditch attempt to prod the conscience of those who might yet be able to help.

Although both poets have their poetic roots in the mellifluous language of Polish Romanticism, both "Campo di Fiori" and "Here too Like in Jerusalem" are marked by restrained language and an unsettling aura of the commonplace. This shift is not unusual for Milosz; indeed, he is famous for his multi-dimensional poetic sensibility and his gift for speaking with many voices. These characteristics are in part attributed to the breadth and depth of his experiences. Born in Lithuania in 1911, he had lived in different parts of Tsarist Russia, Estonia, and Poland, frequently leaving and later returning to the same place, and always open to the culture that distinguished the place in which he lived. Moreover, he had close ties with numerous literary movements in Poland, often determining their development. During the German occupation he lived in Warsaw, where he was editor of an underground anthology of poetry, Piesn niepodlegla, 1942 (The Independent Song). In 1951 he left Poland, lived in Paris until 1960, and since

that time in the United States, where he taught Polish Literature at Berkeley.

The brutality of the German invasion of Poland in 1939 caused Milosz (like many other Polish poets mentioned in this study) to call into question the very purpose and morality of art. The savagery that he witnessed challenged the humanistic principles and faith that are associated with poetry. "The act of writing a poem," he argues, "is an act of faith; yet if the screams of the tortured are audible in the poet's room, is not his activity an offense to human suffering? And if the next hour may bring his death and the destruction of his manuscript, should the poet engage in such a pastime?"²⁴ He resolved this moral dilemma by an unequivocal answer, as Alexander M. Schenker writes in his "Introduction" to Milosz's Utwory poetyckie (Poetry). "If the world is in pieces, it is the artist's duty to glue these pieces together, to oppose the forces of destruction with his own creative powers."²⁵ This Milosz did by investing his poetic language and prosodic structure with increasing terseness, directness, nakedness and simplicity. Together with such poets as Przybos (discussed in the second chapter) and Jastrun, Milosz left an indelible mark on post-war Polish poetry.

Jastrun, a Jew, born in 1903, reveals in his mature poetry an independent poetic spirit, although his early poetry shows strong Skamander influences (see preceding

chapters). His major work is meditative, concerned, among other things, with man's relationship to time. The author of a biography of Mickiewicz, which has been translated into many languages, he is also an essayist and literary critic who is much respected in his native Poland, where he died several years ago. During the war, he was in hiding on the "Aryan side" of Warsaw. Nonetheless, he managed to produce a body of poetry, Godzina strzeżona (The Defended Hour), published in 1944.

Milosz, a righteous Christian, reflects in "Campo Di Fiori" his deep anguish in the face of the Jewish catastrophe and the ignominy of the Poles and, by symbolic extension, of the silent world. Jastrun, a Jew, stands outside this guilty history. It is noteworthy, however, that both Milosz's poem and Jastrun's "Here too Like in Jerusalem," like all the poetry in Out of the Abyss eschews such words as Jew, Pole or German. Jozef Wittlin interprets this phenomenon in Manichean terms. "To znaczy, że dla poetów ghetta, potworna sprawa między Żydami a Niemcami jest już sprawa ludzkości. I nie jest to już nawet tragedia TEJ wojny. To jakas gigantyczna walka żywiołów światła z żywiołami ciemności, walka dobra i zła, rozgrywająca się na płaszczyźnie ²⁶ wieczności." (This means that for the ghetto poets, the monstrous confrontation between the Jews and Germans is an issue confronting all humanity. And it is not just a tragedy of this war. This is a kind of gigantic struggle between the principles of light and darkness, a struggle between good and

evil, enacted on the stage of eternity.)

CAMPO DI FIORI (Milesz)

W Rzymie, na Campo di Fiori
Kosze oliwek i cytryn
Bruk okrywały winem
I odłamkami kwiatów.
Różowe owoce morza
Sypia na stoły przekupnie,
Narecza ciężkich winogron
Spadają na puch brzoskwini.

Tu na tym właśnie placu
Spalono Giordana Bruna
Kat płomień stosu zazegnał
W kole ciekawiej gawędzi.
A ledwie płomień przygasnął,
Znow pełne były tawerny
kosze oliwek i cytryn
Niesli przekupnie na głowach.

Wspomniałem Campo di Fiori
W Warszawie, przy karuzeli,
W wiosenny wieczór pogodny,
Przy dźwiękach skocznej muzyki.
Salwy za murem ghetta
Głuszyła skoczna melodia
I wlatywały pary
Wysoko w pogodne niebo.

Czasem wiatr z domów płonących
Przewiewał czarne latawce,
Chwytały skrawki w powietrzu
Jadacy na karuzeli.
Rozwiewał suknie dziewczynom
Wiatr od tych domów płonących,
Śmiały się tłumy wesole
W czas pięknej warszawskiej Niedzieli.

Moral ktoś może wyczyta,
Ze lud warszawski czy rzymski
Handluje, bawi się, kocha
Mijając meczenskie stosy.
Inny ktoś może wyczyta
O rzeczy ludzkich mijaniu,
O zapomnieniu co rośnie
Nim jeszcze płomień przygasnął.

Ja jednak wtedy myślałem
O samotności ginących,
O tym, że kiedy Giordano

Wstepowal na rusztowanie,
Nie bylo w ludzkim jezyku
Ani jednego wyrazu,
Aby cos zdolal powiedziec
Ludzkosci, ktora zostaje.

Juz biegli wychylac wino
Sprzedawac biale rozgwiezdy--
Kosze oliwek i cytryn
Niesli w wesolym gwarze.
I byl juz od nich odlegly,
Jakby minely wieki,
A oni czekaja chwile
Na jego odlat w pozarze.

A ci, ginacy samotni,
Juz zapomnieni od swiata,
Jezuk nasz stal sie im obcy
Jak jezyk dawnej planety.
I wszystko bedzie legenda.
A wtedy po wielu latach
Na wielkim Campo di Fiori
Bunt wznieci slowo poety.27

(In Rome, on Campo di Fiori/ Baskets of olives and lemons/
Covered the pavements with wine and flower fragments./ Pink
sea food/ Heaped on the tables of hucksters,/ Armfuls of
heavy grapes/ Fall on the down of peaches.

Here, on this very plaza/ Giordano Bruno was burned./ The
executioner contained the flames of the pyre/ Within the
circle of the curious mob./ The flames had not yet cooled,/
Again full were the taverns,/ Baskets of olives and lemons/
Balanced on the heads of the hucksters.

I recalled Campo di Fiori/ In Warsaw, near the carrousel,/
On a mild spring evening,/ Accompanied by the jingle of
lively music./ Salvos behind the ghetto walls/ Drowned
out by the lively tune/ And couples flew/ High into the
fair sky.

Occasionally, the wind of the burning buildings/ Carried
the black kites,/ The carrousel riders/ Caught the scraps
in the air./ The girls' dresses were blown by/ The wind
of the burning houses,/ The rabble's joyous laughter
resounded/ On the lovely Warsaw Sunday.

Perhaps one can read in this a moral/ That both the Warsaw
and Roman folk/ Conduct business, play, love,/ Passing by
pyres of torture./ Perhaps another will read in this/ The
nature of human transiency,/ The forgetting of what grows/
Even before the flame has cooled.

I, however, thought then/ About the loneliness of the dying,/ About the fact that when Giordano/ Climbed the scaffold,/ Human language had/ Not a single expression/ That could manage to inform/ Humanity that remains.

Already they ran to quaff wine/ To hawk the white galaxy--/ Baskets of olives and lemons/ were carried in the cheerful hum./ And he was already remote from them / As if centuries had passed,/ And they waited a while/ For his disappearance in the fire.

And those dying, solitary ones,/ Already forgotten by the world,/ Foreign rings our language to them/ Like the language of a distant planet./ And all this will be but a legend./ And then, after many years,/ On the great Campo di Fiori/ The poet's word will incite rebellion.)

TU TAKZE JAK W JERUSALEM (Jastrun)

Tu także jak w Jerusalemie
Jest posepny mur placzu.
Ci którzy pod nim stali,
Już go nie zobaczą.

Pusta noc, pusty dom, głuchy gmach.
Stąd ich wywleczono.
Została ciemność i strach
I wniecz--śmierci lono.

Domy w kamiennym pochodzie
Pod nie ublaganym niebem,
Jakby szły za pogrzebem
Tysiące rodzin.

Chrzescijanie, rzućcie lwom,
Wiedzieli za co konają,
A wy/--Oto pusty wasz dom,
ogień ślepy właściciel zajął.

Nie zucił nikt dobrej ziemi
Na ten masowy grób--
Milczeniem pozdrowieni,
Wolni od zdrady słów!

Gdyście ustami, jak rany,
Pragnący wolali wody,
Do pociągów odrutowanych
Nikt wody nie podał.

Uciekła ziemia z pod przeklętych,
Zapadła się w dymy kolei
Warszawa, gdy w szybach pięt
Słońce wolalo, że dzień.

("Here too Like in Jerusalem"

Here too like in Jerusalem/ There is the somber Wailing
Wall./ Those who stood near it,/ Will see it no more.

Empty night, empty building, deaf edifice./ From here
they were dragged./ Darkness and terror remained,/ And
the interior--the womb of death.

Buildings in a stony procession/ Under an unappeased sky,/
Like thousands of families/ In a funeral cortege.

Christians, thrown to the wolves,/ Knew why they were
perishing,/ But you?--Here is your empty house,/ Occupied
by fire,/ A blind proprietor.

No one cast the good earth/ Onto that mass grave--/
Greeted by silence,/ You are free of treacherous words.

When with mouths like wounds,/ Parched, you called for
water,/ No one brought water/ To the sealed trains.

The earth fled under the condemned,/ Warsaw fell in the
smoke of the trains/ And in the windows of the buildings/
The sun announced dawn.)

At the center of each poem is the terrifying epiphany
that the nemesis of humanity is indifference. As an
interpretive witness, Milosz records the hallucinatory
juxtaposition between the gun salvos of the immured Jews
fighting in the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising and the sounds of a
gay tune rising from the carrousel that is poised at the
outer edge of the inferno. The incongruous proximity of the
death rattle of the ghetto (which had finally been subdued by
German artillery and by incendiary bombs, reducing the entire
ghetto into a wasteland of cinders and rubble) and the gay
laughter of the reveling Poles causes the poet to invoke the
memory of the execution of the sixteenth century
philosopher, Giordano Bruno, at Campo di Fiori. The symbolic

significance of this invocation lies in the parallel fate of the philosopher and the Jews. Both were victims of intolerance, a crime that sanctions the murder of one person just as readily as that of millions. Significantly, Giordano Bruno--much like the Jews of his own century--was betrayed to the Inquisition and executed at the stake. He was charged with heresy for his belief in the infinite nature of the universe, his defense of the Copernican system, and his interest in Neoplatonism and Pantheism.

Implied in the parallel fate of the Jews and Giordano Bruno is a general indictment of Christianity which, having fostered intolerance, culminated in the Nuremberg doctrines. But Poland, a devoutly Christian nation, is specifically accused by a Polish Christian himself, appalled that his compatriots have actively or passively betrayed the Jews to the deadliest Inquisition yet: the stake of the ghettos and concentration camps.

Caught in the nightmare of history, Jastrun recedes into a more distant past than does Milosz. Like Sutzkever, his coreligionist, Jastrun invokes the myth of Jewish continuum, casting a bridge between the Wailing Wall and the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto. It is noteworthy that the Wailing Wall has not only been a symbol of grief at the destruction of the temple and dispersion of the Jews, but also that of hope--hope expressed in the eternal Jewish affirmation: "Next Year in Jerusalem." The wall of the Warsaw Ghetto, however, signals the final unloosening of the darkest energies of evil

that are obliterating the very possibility of such affirmations. The bitter irony of the image of the dual walls--uniting and separating the ancient and modern Jews--derives from the fact that while the ancient Jew was cast out of his land and scattered in the world, his posterity, the modern Jew is cast out of the world, his "smoke blown out of the chimney of history.../ His grave dug in the air.../ Between heaven and earth" as "Funeral," another of Jastrun's elegies, in Out of the Abyss, laments.

Both Milosz and Jastrun agonize over the single, unvaried constant in human evolution: the seesaw of cruelty and murder, intolerance and indifference. In the past as in the present, Milosz shows, the rabble's response to a single victim or several million has been the same: the bystanders "Conduct business, play, love,/ Passing by pyres of torture," unable to find "a single expression in the human language" to protest the carnage. The chill of this epiphany is exacerbated by the fact that the dying Jews have been "already by the world forgotten," causing human language to "ring foreign to them/ Like the language of a distant planet." In his wisdom, the poet prophesies that, like Bruno's, the terrible reality of contemporary Jewry will soon become but a legend, nullified by history.

In Jastrun's poem, human indifference is translated into images of silence--silence so absolute that only "buildings in a stony procession/ Under an unappeased sky"

bear witness to the conflagration in the ghetto. Jastrun's world is bereft of God and divested of human witnesses who might be willing to see and much less to "cast the good earth/ onto the mass graves." The concatenation of the poem's images evokes a sense of cosmic silence so absolute that it actually resonates in the consciousness of the reader. Images of empty houses that are consumed by fire, "a blind proprietor;" surreal iconographs of "mouths like wounds," whose cry for water is silenced by the deafness of those who would not hear; "buildings in a stony," funereal procession; the sun announcing dawn in the windows of empty buildings crowd the imagery of the earth fleeing "under the condemned," as the Warsaw Ghetto collapses in the implied admixture of smoke rising from the burning buildings, the trains, and crematoria chimneys. Paradoxically, the solitary consolation is silence, for only silence is "free of treacherous words."

Milosz's poetic universe, on the other hand, explodes in a cacophony of sounds and kinetic energy. The vulgar jingle of a carrousel; raucous laughter of the rabble; couples flying "high into the fair sky;" wind-born cinders like "black kites" rising over the ghetto walls; dresses ballooning in the wind--all these denotations of indifference drown out the "salvos behind the ghetto walls."

The pictorial power of "Campo di Fiori" and "Here too Like in Jerusalem," coupled as it is with tones of inconsolable grief, suggests the poets' disquieting suspicion

that the edifice and, in fact, the very foundation of Western Civilization are going up with the smoke of the Jews. For civilization and its determinants, the poets seem to imply, are a stream of events generated by antecedent and contemporaneous processes. It is this that produces a continuum within which accepted and established beliefs, customs, and laws are transmitted from one generation to the next, from one culture to another. The progression of events from the earliest beginnings of Western Civilization to the Wailing Wall, to Giordano Bruno, to the wall of the Warsaw Ghetto and the merry carrousel outside it--all of these had established such a continuum: an archetype against which future bloodlettings will be measured and included within the purview of the acceptable and permissible. In paralleling Giordano Bruno and the Jews or in bridging the Wailing Wall with the wall of the ghetto, the poets reflect their deep apprehension that Western Civilization has, in the end, been a dismal failure.

Yet despite their despair, both poets, like most of the writers in the Holocaust, continued to write. Indeed, unlike those bystanders who passively watch "pyres of torture" or who even take the trouble to justify their own indifference by such cliches as the transiency of human life (fifth strophe), Milosz vows, in the closing lines of his poem, to breathe into the cinders of the immolated word the resonance of protest. But anguish and irony mark this solemn promise;

for he knows that standing with but a few who share his alarm, his voice will, at best, be heard in times to come, when the events he is witnessing "will be but a legend." Perhaps "then, after many years/ On the great Campo di Fiori/ The poet's word will incite rebellion."

"Campo di Fiori" and Milosz's other war time poetry were officially published after the war in a volume entitled Ocalenie, 1945 (Salvation). Among the poems included in this volume, perhaps the most eloquent and the most germane to this discussion, is the surrealistic "Biedny Chrzescijanin patrzy na ghetto" (A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto). In it Milosz provides a chilling formulation of the turmoil he, a solitary Christian neighbor, experiences as he watches the destruction of the Warsaw Ghetto. The poet's despair, his political and moral isolation, and his frustration and impotence reach the highest emotional pitch in the closing three stanzas of the poem:

Powoli, drazac tunel, posuwa sie straznik-kret
Z mala czerwona latarka przypieta na czole.
Dotyka cial pogrzebnych, liczy, przedziera sie dalej,
Rozroznia ludzki popiol po teczujacym oparze,
Popiol kazdego czlowieka po innej barwie teczy.
Pszczoły obudowuja czerwony slad,
Mrowki obudowuja miejsce po moim cielem.

Boje sie, tak sie boje straznika-kreta.
Jego powieka obrzmiala jak u patriarchy,
Ktory siadywal duzo w blasku swiec
Czytajac wielka ksiege gatunku.

Coz powiem mu, ja, Zyd Nowego Testamentu,
Czekajac od dwoch tysiecy lat na powrot Jezusa?
Moje rozbite cialo wyda mnie miedzy pomocnikow smierci:
Nieobrzezanych.²⁹

Slowly, boring a tunnel, a guardian mole makes his way,
With a small red lamp fastened to his forehead.
He touches burned bodies, counts them, pushes on,
He distinguishes human ashes by their luminous vapor,
The ashes of each man by a different part of the
spectrum.

Bees build around a red trace.
Ants build around the place left by my body.

I am afraid, so afraid of the guardian mole.
He has swollen eyelids, like a Patriarch
Who sat much in the light of the candles
Reading the great book of the species.

What will I tell him, I, a Jew of the New Testament
Waiting two thousand years for the second coming of
Jesus?

My broken body will deliver me to his sight
And he will count me among the helpers of death:
The uncircumcised.³⁰

Milosz takes an image of a subterranean animal, a mole,
and identifies its existence in nature with the unexpected: a
Jew making his way in the subterranean world of the Warsaw
Ghetto bunkers and sewers. Such images of human reductivity,
anticipated in Kafka's Metamorphosis, appear in other
Holocaust poems, in Szlengel's "Counterattack," for example,
in which human beings are reduced to cattle. Unlike the mole
in nature, the human mole, using the sewers as an avenue of
escape from the burning ghetto, encounters in his impossible
world improbable substances: "human ashes" distinguished from
other essences "by their luminous vapor,/ The ashes of each
man by a different part of the spectrum."

The surreal landscape of this poem suggests the mythical,
a world made timeless by what Mircea Eliade calls "transhuman
31
revelations," thought to express the absolute truth which
took place at the dawn of time. Milosz, the artist as

mediator of experiences as primal (if unparalleled), as those that make for mythology, interprets the truth he sees as the dawn of a new time. The unfolding history is to him the only valid revelation of reality, and his close proximity to the events as well as the immediacy of his experiences overwhelm his emotions. And "when a poet is overwhelmed by strong emotions," writes Milosz, "his form tends to become³² more simple and more direct." Yet the word constellations of "A Poor Christian Looks at the Burning Ghetto" rise like a barricade between the poet and reader, much like the barriers between archaic myths and their uninitiated, modern reader. Obviously, Milosz is direct, even if the truth he narrates is unutterable and the images he projects seem surreal. Hence, what the "mole," the protagonist of his poem, actually encounters in his subterranean sojourn is a sewer strewn with corpses of badly burned Jews who jumped out the windows of flaming buildings and who died of their burns while attempting to reach the "Aryan Side" of Warsaw. Indeed, so badly burned are they that they form an undifferentiated mass of ash; and only the human "mole," guided in the darkness by a cyclopean eye, "a small red lamp fastened to his forehead," can distinguish one body from another by their "luminous vapor,... by a different part of the spectrum."

Significantly, the poet is afraid of the "mole." For being Jewish, he is the "guardian mole," the source and keeper of the Old Testament, "the book of the species," and the giver of the New Testament. The poem's pervasive sense

of angst arises from the implied causal relationship between the poet as Christian "the uncircumcised Jew of the New Testament," and the destruction of his religious ancestor to whose safekeeping "the book of the species," hence the very underpinning of Christianity, has been vouchsafed. The mood of unease builds to cumulative distress when the reader realizes the sense of guilt and impotence experienced by a person who single-handedly refuses to be absorbed into cosmic indifference. The poet's metaphysical and existential isolation and his guilty (because Christian) relationship to the Jews are expressed in these evocative insect images:

Bees build around a red trace.

Ants build around the place left by my body.

So dispensable is the "guardian mole," so futile his religious legacy that nothing but insects build around the red trace left by his red lamp. And so insignificant is the poet's solitary human attempt that nothing, but a useless trace, as futile as the memory of the Jews, will remain for posterity. And so, despite his conscience and his protest, articulated in his poetry, Milosz is afraid that, "waiting two thousand years for the second coming of Jesus" he will be counted "among the helpers of death."

Milosz did not wait for the second coming of Christ, nor did he allow his grief to paralyze his moral sensibility. His personal protest, a vow he makes in "Campo di Fiori," is ubiquitous in his writing; for grounded in religion, humanism, and politics his work reflects his determination to

preserve and create human values. Nor is his apprehension that the Jewish tragedy "will be but a legend," a sentimental utterance to be casually forgotten. In his Zniewolony umysl 1953 (Captive Mind), Milosz warns against this, providing a mandate for and challenge to writers to guard against any tendency to coopt the landscape of slaughter and to project onto it extra-Holocaust concerns (erotic, existential, esthetic, etc.) or to misappropriate it for political or any other ideologies. Aware that verisimilitude of the Holocaust is impossible and the details, because not analogous, are difficult to assimilate, the poet asks not to superimpose³³ onto this tragedy images that do not derive from it.

The concerns articulated in this book are particularly timely in view of the wild profusion of myths and abstractions of theories (including the plathora of Nazi gutter historiography), that have been postulated to explain (or deny) the Holocaust. This is, by no means, to suggest that an inquiry into the causes of the central event of the Twentieth Century is not the proper and necessary subject of mimetic art, history, philosophy, religion, and the social sciences. One would only hope that the writers would either reflect Milosz's concerns or at least heed his mandate.

NOTES

1
Lucy Dawidowicz, The War Against The Jews: 1939- 1945.
(New York: Bentam Books, 1976), p. 353.

2
Emanuel Ringelblum, Notitsn Fun Varshever Ghetto
(Notes From the Warsaw Ghetto), (Warsaw: Yiddish Buch Verlag,
1963. V. II), pp. 189-193.

3
Abraham Sutzkever, "Shtim fun Harts" (The Heart's
Voice), in Lider fun Yam Hamoves (Songs from the Dead Sea),
(Tel Aviv: World Federation of Bergen-Belsen Associations,
1968), p. 16. Further references to Sutzkever's poem are in
this anthology. Translations of poetry from this anthology
are this writer's.

4
Ruth Wisse, "The Ghetto Poems of Abraham Sutzkever,"
The Jewish Book Annual (New York: Jewish Book Council, 1979,
p. 28.

5
Sutzkever, "Tsum Yortog Fun Ghetto Teater" (To the
Anniversary of the Ghetto Theatre), pp. 39-40

6
Chaim Nachman Bialik, "In the Slaughter Town," in The
Golden Peacock: A Worldwide Treasury of Yiddish Poetry,
ed. and trans. Joseph Leftwich (New York: Thomas
Yoseloff, 1961), p. 56.

7
Ibid., p. 57.

8
Hanna Arendt, The Origins of Totalitarianism, New
York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1951), p. 137.

9
Alexander Donat, The Holocaust Kingdom (New York:
Holocaust Library, 1963), p. 104.

- 10 Waldyslaw Szlengel, "Kontratak" (Counterattack), in Co czytalem umarlym (What I Read to The Dead), ed. Irena Maciejewska (Warsaw: Panstwowy institut wydawniczy, 1977), pp. 137-40. Further references to Szlengel's poetry are in this anthology. Translations of poetry from this anthology are this writer's.
- 11 Szlengel, "Co czytalem umarlym," p. 17.
- 12 David Roskies, "The Pogrom Poem and the Literature of Destruction." Notre Dame English Journal, XI: 2, (April, 1979), p. 89.
- 13 Shmerke Katcherginsky, "Partizaner Marsh" (March of the Partisans), in Lider fun Ghetos un Lagern (Ghetto and Concentration Camp Songs), ed. Shmerke Katcherginsky, (New York: The Shoulson Press, 1948), p. 345. Translations of poetry from this anthology are this writer's.
- 14 For a more detailed discussion see Lester Eckman and Chaim Lazar, The Jewish Resistance (New York: Shengold Publishers, 1977), pp.40-42.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Sutzkever, "Baglaytlid Baym Oroysgeyn in Vald" (Song to Accompany the Departure to the Forest), p. 93.
- 17 Sutzkever, "Blayenhe Platin Fun Roms Drukeray" (The Lead Plates of the Rom Press), p. 94.
- 18 This writer escaped a pogrom staged by the A.K. in Dzialoszyce and Chorzow in 1945. The pogrom in Chorzow was actually aborted.
- 19 Itzhak Zukerman, "The Creation and Development of ZOB," in Lucy Dawidowicz, A Holocaust Reader (New York: Berhman House, 1976), pp. 359-380.
- 20 Ber Mark, Uprising in the Warsaw Ghetto, trans. Gershon Freidlin (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 7.

- 21
Zukerman, p. 379
- 22
Jakob Apenszlak, "Słowo wtsepne" (Introduction), in Z otchłani: Poezja ghetta z podziemia żydowskiego w Polsce (Out of the Abyss: Ghetto Poetry from the Jewish Underground in Poland) (New York: Association of Friends of our Tribune, 1945), p. 5. Translation of poetry from this anthology are this writer's.
- 23
Jozef Witlin, "Poklon poetom ghetta" (To the Ghetto Poets), Z otchłani, p. 8.
- 24
Czesław Miłosz, The History of Polish Literature (London: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 458.
- 25
Alexander Schenker, "Introduction," in Czesław Miłosz, Utwory poetyckie (Poetry) (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1976), p. XVII.
- 26
Witlin, Z otchłani, p. 10.
- 27
Miłosz, "Campo di Fiori," Ibid., pp. 23-4.
- 28
Mieczysław Jastrun, "Tu także jak w Jeruzalem" (Here Too Like in Jerusalem), Ibid., p. 14.
- 29
Miłosz, "Biedny Chrzescijanin patrzy na ghetto" (A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto), in Utwory poetyckie, p. 100.
- 30
Miłosz, "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto," in A History of Polish Literature, pp. 459-60.
- 31
Mircea Eliade, Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), p. 23.
- 32
Miłosz, A History of Polish Literature, p. 459.
- 33
Czesław Miłosz, Captive Mind, trans. Jane Zielenko. (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1953), p. 41.

CONCLUSION

Poetry in the Holocaust challenges the explanatory ability of literary criticism for a number of reasons. Above all, it is a literature in extremis, one that lays bare atrocities and horrors so unparalleled (though somewhat assuaged by the spiritual fortitude of a doomed people) that it seems to defeat every attempt at description, expression, or literary exegesis. Yet, because the poem is at once the most primal and complex of literary utterances, its "defined and confined space," as Hamida Bosmajian succinctly put it, "its few words...., has given many a human being [this writer included] a momentary sense of order in the chaos and rigidity of the holocaust...." For the critic, this duality--criticism's challenge and the ephemeral sense of order in the chaos--applies both to Yiddish and Polish-Jewish poetry.

Even pre-Holocaust Yiddish poetry, including that which succeeded in forming a nexus with modernistic literary trends--romanticism, impressionism, expressionism, symbolism, etc.--remained more difficult for the critic unfamiliar with the Yiddish culture and its culture laden language to interpret than any other literature. This is because Yiddish literature, despite its attempt to transcend, if not to

destroy the confines of its tradition, remains insular, showing close links with the Yiddish folk song, and using language full of allusions to Jewish civil and religious laws and to Hasidic lore.

The problem for the critic with pre-war Polish-Jewish poets is less formidable. Still, many of them, perhaps more so than their counterparts writing in West European languages, were rooted in the Yiddish culture. Few Polish Jews were so thoroughly assimilated that their Yiddish heritage and its language were totally foreign to them. Thus these poets have been known to show various traces of Yiddish in their writing, which, incidentally, brought down upon them rains of abusive epithets from anti-Semitic Polish purists. Even such celebrated poets as Julian Tuwim (1894-1953), whose Polish was impeccable--allegedly, at least partially, because he tried to shield himself against the tyranny of Jewish history in Poland--and who was a passionate student of the Polish language, an etymological hunter in pursuit of Polish words, their stems, prefixes, and suffixes, was roundly derided by many a friend and foe alike for his attempt to trespass into the Polish poetic turf.

During the war, the Yiddish poets retreated into traditionalism, finding in the literary paradigms a mode of expression more suitable to the devastation around them than modernistic trends could provide. And even the Polish-Jewish poets felt impelled to re-examine their heritage, both Polish and Yiddish, and to rediscover the Jewish lines of

continuity with the past. Although they continued to write in Polish, since they were presumably more comfortable in this language, they often spiced their poems with deliberate Yiddishisms. This they did both to affirm their Jewishness, to link themselves to the Yiddish folk, and to destroy Polish diction and syntax. Wladyslaw Szlengel, among others--especially the street singers in the Warsaw Ghetto--is an example of this trend.

The problem connected with the insularity and particularism of Yiddish and Polish-Jewish poetry in the Holocaust is further complicated by linguistic permutations ushered in by concentrationary slang of Yiddish, Polish, and Nazi-Deutsch provenance. These complexities, as I hinted in the Introduction to this study, prompted me to seek the most suitable method of analysis, which I almost intuitively found in textual explication. The close scrutiny imposed by this critical approach is a form of "perspectivism" that allows a work of art to be evaluated within its own context and its own time: in short it allows the poetry to speak for itself. Since other methods of literary criticism--Freudian, Marxist, formalist, or structuralist--as Alvin Rosenfeld convincingly argues in A Double Dying,² are not applicable to literature in and of the Holocaust because the poets in that world were hardly concerned with covert Oedipal symbols, class struggle allusions, or other such issues, the only other thing to do is not to "review" it at all, as George Steiner exhorts us to

do:

These books and documents that have survived are not for 'review.' Not unless 'review' signifies, as perhaps it should in these instances, a 'seeing-again,' over and over. As in some Borges fable, the only decent 'review' of the Warsaw Diary... would be to re-copy the book, line by line, pausing at the names of the dead and the names of the children as the orthodox scribe pauses, when re-copying the Bible, at the hallowed name of God. Until we know many of these words by heart (knowledge deeper than mind) and can repeat a few at the break of morning to remind ourselves that we live after....3

Would this mandate be enough, perhaps? Yet I think that the poetry which I discuss needs to be explained for the simple reason that it does not translate well into English or any other language, for that matter. This can be said of all poetry, but it might be granted that the Yiddish and Polish-Jewish poetry in the Holocaust are especially problematic both for translator and critic who are not at home with the languages and the world in which the poems and songs were written. Obviously my translations are literal rather than literary, which unfortunately transform verse into prose and thereby rob the poems of their poetic sense. My only consolation is that these translations are faithful to the texts.

This dissertation is but the tip of the iceberg. Translations more loyal to the "poetic feeling" of the poems than my own need to be undertaken. Exegeses of other poetry--Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, and perhaps literature written in other languages during the Holocaust--need to be continued in order to shed some new light on the incomprehensible.

Additional scrutiny may uncover other truths, reach conclusions other than, or confirm my own.

The conclusions that I draw from this study are these: Poetry in the Holocaust provides an existential correlative to the historian's objective chronicling of fact. As a form of mimetic art it reveals a spectrum of personal and communal perceptions and responses to the unfolding events. It shows that despite the traditional pacifism of Judaism, the Jews were not passive, for they fought back with all they had. They were the first in all of occupied Europe to rise in armed revolt against the Germans. They created an underground culture and ingenious support systems without which survival would have been impossible. While there was a crisis of faith, they continued to affirm life and Jewish traditional values, of which writing poetry, this noblest of human literary expressions, in the darkest of pits, is but one example. And it is not that they wrote secretly at the risk of life, but that they wrote at all, exhorting the people to armed rebellion (even when it was impossible), to spiritual resistance, and moral conduct. That the manuscripts were saved in milk tins, buried together with other records--those of Emanuel Ringelblum, the noted historian, for example--and unearthed under the ruins of the Warsaw Ghetto after the war renders them both sacred and a valuable record from which generalizations and stratagems for the prevention and intervention of future genocides may be culled.

NOTES

- 1 Hamida Bosmijian, Metaphors of Evil: Contemporary German Literature and the Shadow of Nazism (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1979), p. 183.
- 2 Alvin Rosenfeld, A Double Dying: Reflections on Holocaust Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), p. 19.
- 3 George Steiner, Language and Silence: Essays on Language, Literature and the Inhuman (New York: Atheneum, 1967) p. 168.

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- ". "Szpital obozowy" (Camp Hospital). In Piesn ujdzie calo, pp. 56-7.
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- ". "Introduction." In Piesn ujdzie calo. pp. 10-50.
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